



**IF YOU LIKE:  
flash fiction**

**Wayne Scott Ray**

## Table of Contents

### If You Like: flash fiction short stories:

A combination of styles inspired by *The Waves*: Virginia Wolfe, stream of consciousness writing: James Joyce, Slice of Life short fiction: William Soroyan, surrealism: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, storying: Ted Plantos  
et al. as well as found prose.

Prisoner of Women's Dreams  
What My Cat Thinks  
The Captain  
Eight Minutes  
Owl Lake  
Stream of dreams  
Shesaidloverambleson  
Don't Blame The Stone  
The Empty Café  
His Hands  
The Receiving Room  
Gabriel Garcia  
Happiness and Sorrow  
The Grey Wolf  
Mirage  
A Strange and Wonderful Present  
Apartment on Bathurst Street  
Messenger  
Toronto And Other Lives  
River Avon  
Arching In The Dark  
Random Thoughts  
Leviathan & Leviathan at Fifteen  
Mondohunkamooga:  
    The Sleeping Ducks &The Veiled Threat  
A Short Pace

### Linked Slice of Life Short Stories:

Prose section of *Going down Goose Lane  
toward Broken Jaw* Harmonia Press 2005

Leaving London  
    May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002  
    Leaving London  
    Surprised By Joy  
    Plaster Rock  
    Karen (in three parts)  
        Kelly  
        Sarah  
        Allan

## **Giants Of The North**

*Third Eye Press 1994*

War Dream

Summer of '64

Squeaking Noises

Kick The Can

Peper's Cove

Lisa

Vissen Op De Brug

Time Wounds All Heals

## **Tsalagi: Trail of Tears**

(CD *Prisoner of Women 's Dreams*, HMS Press 2006)

## **Book Reviews:**

### ***Going down Goose Lane toward Broken Jaw***

by Anne Burke *Prairie Journal*

### ***Going down Goose Lane toward Broken Jaw***

by David Fraser *Ascent Aspirations Magazine*

### ***Giants of the North***

by Mark Young *Scene Magazine*

**IF YOU LIKE**  
**flash fiction**  
**Wayne Scott Ray**

**HMS Press**  
**POBox 340 Stn. B**  
**London Ontario N6A 4W1**

**literarynewscpa@yahoo.ca**

**Cover Art: Brian Patton**

## **PRISONER OF WOMEN'S DREAMS**

He was a prisoner of women's dreams. He was the illusion of reality. He was the illusion and he was the reality. He left an impression on the women that he knew that seemed to last forever in their sweet dreams. Dreams that kept them warm at night under the blanket of thought which they purchased from the people they called friends. He thought they were in love with the idea of being loved. He thought they loved the loving and not the lover. He loved them all. He could not get away or release himself from their grasp, their thoughts, their eyes, their thighs.

One by one they let him go but kept a strip of flesh or heart lining from his heart wall for their dreams. These women were selfish and weak. They wanted both the illusion and the reality. The women he knew pulled the strips of flesh out of their hiding places and when they used his memory for their own pleasure, he felt it. He was a prisoner of women's dreams.

He thought about freedom. He thought about freedom and how he had given freely and without constraint and with true love. Was it actually love? Was it actually the illusion of love or was it love's illusion? He was searching for love. The women were searching for love. He was not searching for women. What were they searching for, looking for, tearing at his heart for? If they weren't running to him for love, but running toward love, what were they running away from? What was he running away from? He was a prisoner of women's dreams.

He turned around one day in the Hall of Mirrors and behind his own reflection he found he was a prisoner of women's dreams. He realized he was running away from himself. He was searching for the illusion. He was the illusion. He began to search for himself. The love that he had been giving to others, he began to give to himself. The friendship that he had been giving to others, he began giving to himself. I am the reality he said to himself one day. I am no longer the illusion, and the strips of flesh and the torn heart lining didn't hurt as much.

When he thought of sharing himself with himself and when he thought of sharing his love with himself and when he thought of being his own best friend, the wounds began to heal. The women that he knew began to dream of other men. The women began to form new illusions and new realities. Now he felt he was no longer a prisoner, no longer a prisoner of women's dreams. He was not the reality. He was his own reality.

## **WHAT MY CAT THINKS**

These are not peaceful times upon which I can calmly count out the inequalities in my life nor are these joyful times as my manner leaps and falls at the same time over sometimes, the same events and darkness falls early on my shadow in these, not peaceful times where I remain, in camera, a solitary rock upon which leaves cover traces of grains of gneiss, striations of dark and light as these days are now, because I feel I'm losing you, or am I just losing your love to these aforementioned inequalities in my life as I've become more silent now, speaking less of mutual things and trapping your emotions as a scull traps water in a race against time, mine, yours and ours because time races against no one person or thing inside this room where there is no cold, no rain, no fear, no pain; there is no light either and you are outside of this life growing older, growing better, smiling through the barren trees whose leaves have been tumbling and falling against my window pane lately while you race merrily about town knowing who you are and where you are going, growing, gathering shadows about you to keep your dreams warm at night under the blankets of thought you purchase from the people you call friends, a word that fills your own heart and thoughts much easier than it fills mine as I have so few unless I dream of you and your influence but I need more than your touch to pull me out of this room full of inequality and unrest, I need your strength and the strength of your heart, your hand, your comradery and that certain something that I have been searching for all of my days that has kept me in the dark for so long, occasionally to let in the light, some fresh air, food of the Gods, spring flowers, knowledge of the outside world where you play, where you stay away from me but here at the same time, and you engulf my emotions, swallow my ego, unchain my skin, feel my breath's heat upon your freedom and you know I don't want you to come to me but pull me to join you in more peaceful times to help balance the inconsistency for every thing must change and I must change and you, you should not change but love and live and give life where I only take it away, push it back into the corners of my shadowed room as I sit between the wall and the fridge on the small tiles with my face in my hands and rivers flow from my soul until I can cry no more into this flooded room until it has drained away and the room is bereft of all things and there is but one tear left in the Guff and in this naked flesh which rolls from this orb onto the lip and drips off into the void, down, down, down onto the tiles at my aching feet, explode into light and color while the walls fade away and bricks disappear, windows open and the light floods in with the air and I find you, arms outstretched, standing there.

## THE CAPTAIN

The rusted trunk lid came open quite easily to my surprise as it had been closed to me for some twenty and seven years now and I can't say why my recent rambles have brought me to this musty attic corner as I have been doing for hours, or for years now where the lid lay open for a long time before I sat, reached into the steel trunk and slowly unfolded the flag of my patriotism which was wrapped around my trench knife, dust of my heart, blood of my transgressions, ahh...three years in Europe go by in that instant, men and machines destroying Brest, rebuilding Cardiff, following Paton in his endless flight, an endless night, it seems like only yesterday and I close my minds eye to my life which is impossible now while I continue to pull things out of the trunk and the dice fall out of my hand, snake eyes in the dust beside the trunk which sits without a sound against the back of the truck as the men loaded on the H.M.S. Hughes at Marseille and head for the Philippines on the first troop ship to pass through the Panama Canal cram packed with the five thousand men who went into that little ship and six years later I set the flag aside I slip on my combat boots and stand in the rice paddies of that Hell hole, AnYang, Korea where we spent seventy-seven days without V.D. and then some private comes in with Leprosy, bull dozers falling off of cliffs, starving Koreans in the camp dump and everything seems to fall into place, that Emily Post arrangement of things as the trunk was put on a plane and sent back to the land of its making where it sits half full and half empty against the attic wall as my mind is loaded onto a dream ship headed past the Philippines, past Korea, past the sixteen-thousand days of my life, past all those days on the air force base no, not past those years of my life, those years in that frozen paradise where we endured years of; clam bakes, lobster boils, parties, blue skies and February fogs, barracks and bogs, army protocol and vice chiefs of staff and I see that my manuscripts are still here, transcripts of a time gone by, when all we wanted to do was fly, to live long and never die, no one remembers us but O GOD do we ever remember We and ...I hear my wife downstairs preparing lunch or is it supper time and I hear my sons coming home from school and helping set the table and I hear footsteps in the trunk running fast so I fill up the trunk and lay the flag of my patriotism on the top and the running stops and I close the lid and there is knocking from within...next time I'll bring my sons into the attic...the pounding grows endless...I'll come back soon, I will...the pounding ceased and the footsteps walked slowly away, the footsteps and I, walked slowly away and human dust filled the tears in the eyes of God..

## **EIGHT MINUTES**

I wish the pen didn't have to leave the page for eight minutes but every time I breathe I lift it off the page to pen another word for the remaining seven minutes which is the same number of volcanoes that erupted under the Iceland ice sheet glacier fire breathing Gaia shutting down air flights over eastern Europe and still I breathe rhythmically trying to keep the pen on the paper for six, maybe five minutes now and I can truly say that "if I had a pen / I would write a haiku / about this moment" which is a haiku unto itself while I breathe and lift and breathe and lift and write and breathe and lift and time myself as this spring day turns cold and some snow falls in front of the restored Capitol Theater and Bowles Building across the street which weren't really restored as the originals were made of Terra Cotta, but these ones are actually copies and replaced by cut limestone and now one minute left and I actually did lift my pen off the page again and I sit here waiting for the others to finish writing for eight minutes, waiting and waiting and waiting . . .

## **OWL LAKE**

The gun shot cracked the still night air across the lake from the Owl Lake Cottages where I was standing one vacation eve in the summer of my heart's content and I could clearly see the faint fire from the long black barrel push the lead lance from the rifle in the cabin doorway and stop sharp between the shoulder blades of a spurned and tormented lover, friend, father, husband, standing at the end of a long wooden dock at the exact moment he began to dive into the cold dark lake, leaving a crimson stain on the brown weather worn planks the color of the fingernails on the hands that held the fire stick of death, just moments before.



## STREAM OF DREAMS

the furnace kicks in after the children leave the house to walk uptown along the crumbling grey side walk in the rain dripping from the trees to the new mall through the wet February weather and you sit uncomfortably on the three legged barstool that you stained mahogany because you didn't have any pine in the white kitchen you remodeled yourself with materials you scrounged from work and you look up at the bare branches of the walnut tree above the garage through the kitchen window and footsteps come slowly down the stairs from the bedroom where you had spent most of the night in a wet dream and walk across the floor and out the side door after pleasantly muttering something about being back in three or four hours then the door closes while the family cat sits on the square floor tiles licking his paws and his ass as the engine of an automobile maybe yours starts up and the sound disappears just after you look up at the cat whose looking out the window and you look out the window again at the cold sky and down at your empty cup sitting on the counter top that you paid five hundred dollars for and bubbles are showing and the glue is coming apart over at the double sink and its not long before the blood pounding in your right ear and the traffic on the outside of your red brick mortgaged to the hilt house is all that you hear until the furnace shuts off and the refrigerator grinds to a halt but the furnace blower stays on for a while drying the air in the house sealed up for the winter where the philodendron that sits on the microwave lacks one of the essential elements of photosynthesis namely water to help it regain its turgidity and pull its leaves away from the cold glass which reminds you of the plants leaning against the glass at the greenhouse of the president of the local university where you once worked when you were working instead of having to wait around from week to week for the unemployment cheque to arrive and you bite your tongue because you were drifting off and it really hurts like the time you drove a nail through your finger last summer when you were up shingling the roof of your two story home as that female university student in the house next door lay naked on her second level bedroom floor for the longest time doing exercises and playing with herself because she knew you were looking at her breasts as you banged the hammer in time to her sit-ups and banged the nail through your finger into the roof hurt like the dickens so you drink cold water to numb the pain in your tongue and as you look up a few flakes of wet snow begin to fall on the garage and you wonder if the children have on their boots not that they forget but a lot of the time they just don't think but they're good kids in the long run like the cat whose purring so loud you'd think he was right on top of your ear and he jumps in your lap but you don't make room for him so he has to suffer love on a small space looking at you with eyes so innocent they could have been the eyes of your first girlfriend when you were out on a date and she wanted you to kiss her but doesn't say anything and her panties are full of dew drops and she doesn't know why and you want to kiss her but its your first time and she just looks up at you like the cat does and smiles the most beautiful smile in the world before closing her eyes and you wonder where she is now and what she's doing and whose kissing her and does she still purr like the cat in your lap who stops and looks up because he thinks he hears something but its nothing and you push him gently off and the snow is falling faster out the window and its only been sixteen minutes since everyone left the house but it seems like an hour because there's very little sun light now in February unlike the february you spent three weeks of in the summer of 72 or 82 but it doesn't really matter when it was because it was so hot and so sunny in the small town of ocho rios jamaica where the ocean water was crystal clear down to sixty five feet where someone you worked with told you her and her boyfriend from saskatoon had made love that deep on the ocean floor in the same harbor years before and she had told you this one day at work when the two of you were alone in the red pick up truck driving along the highway at sixty miles per hour on your way out of town to a job and she wanted to know if you had any juicy stories as well because she loves to gossip and she loves to listen and she was thinking about him and missed him she said as you told her your steamiest tale while she closed her eyes and relaxed her legs rubbing her hand on the wet crotch of her jeans and then felt embarrassed because she didn't want you to get the wrong idea and asked you to stop talking but you were already doing ninety miles an hour in a fifty minutes is that how much time has

passed since everyone left and you've been sitting on the same stool without moving and your bum is getting numb so you get up slowly and slide along the hardwood to the front door and pick up the mail you didn't even hear being placed in the mail slot at sometime in the day by the mail man from postal depot b located just down the road from where you live across the river from the regional art gallery where you were involved in a fist fight last saturday night when you went by to see some old friends who worked security there and just as you arrived at sixteen minutes after midnight you had to help break up a fight between rival gangs from the university chinese club who had rented the community gallery and would be losing their deposit because of all of the broken artwork but the management doesn't care as long as they get their money and the insurance will pay for everything just like it paid for your new car after the wife went through a stop sign and was pushed up against the trunk of a one hundred and fifty year old acid rain damaged sugar maple that didn't budge one inch at the time of impact and it was a good thing she had her seat belt on because she wouldn't be around to walk out the door fifty five minutes ago to go to classes at the university where she's working on her doctorate and the only one in the family working right now and lets you know about it in plain english . . . "get a job". . . she says everyday and you couldn't agree with her more for you've spent most of the morning going over the classified section of the two daily papers that you buy regularly from the westside variety just north of the river where the second most beautiful woman in the world works and she smiles that almond eyed smile that makes you think she knows everyone who enters the store is like family and she knows your name and the name of the next customer and the next but you can't remember hers because you've got a terrible memory for names but not for faces and you'll remember her face in your dreams at night in bed when you're not dreaming of the wife and how much she's meant to you through all the trials and tribulations of a twenty year marriage that really has had its ups and down ins and outs and you feel like trading her in sometimes and other times you wouldn't trade her in for the second most beautiful woman in the world because she's worked so hard at getting where she is now and you know that she still loves you after all these years because her bartholin gland would fill to the brim at your slightest touch when she's had a hard day and wants you to hold her like the day you did in the summer of some summer somewhere in your past when you made love in a warm rainstorm on the edge of a moss covered cliff three hundred feet above the ground on a ledge somewhere in the british columbia mountains where you went on your honeymoon and woke the next morning on the sun warmed wet rocks watching a baby deer lick the sweat off her back and she thought it was you but the owls are not what they seem as they fly overhead searching for the white lodge and you lay there in love for the first time in your life with the clouds above and the sun bursts on you like a giant hangover from some day last week after you had been for your fourteenth rejected job interview down at the something or other place which isn't important now because you didn't get the damn job anyway and you rest your head in your hands and lean on your five hundred dollar bubbling counter top and you burst into tears when you were thinking about the death of your father the year before and you miss him because he cant say i love you when he's gone like the roll of Scott towels you reach for to wipe your eyes and blow that enormous hunk of mucous from your nose and scrape the hard booggers from the rim like you've been doing all your life and everyone you've ever worked with when you were working and not on unemployment knows your name is really wilson pickit and you've never once wondered who had to clean under all the tables and chairs and window sills that you've ever passed by when your nose was plugged like the kitchen sink was yesterday when it overflowed and leaked into your office in the basement and ruined your autographed first edition copies of all the books by gabriel garcia-marquez who is the greatest writer of our time whom you'd met at a literary reading at the central library last year because everyone believes if it doesn't take place at the central library don't go which wasn't even comparable to the one at harborfront and he came over to your house with his translator and a few other local writers because you were having a reception for him and he signed all your copies of his books and said he would use both your daughters names in his next novel because he had never met young women who were six feet tall in his country the sun is so hot it pushes them down he said not like here where they seem to stretch up to the sun which hasn't come out of

the clouds all day as you look up from the ten thousandth classified column and out the kitchen window over the top of the garage past the bedroom of the naked student through the gaps in the leafless trees down the grey wet street past the bicycle bridge that crosses the green river and along the asphalt pathway that wanders aimlessly into the jobless city and up into the grey sky where the voices of all lost souls gather like human dust in the tears of god seventy two minutes after the house was empty of family and all that you hear is the furnace kicking in and the cat heard the gun go off but all you heard was the click of the hammer..

## **SHE SAID LOVE RAMBLE SON** (found prose A.G.)

don't take me seriously, just take me . . . but seriously . . . I just meant that you don't take me too seriously, kind of a good thing really . . . now working on stuff for you for next week, hope you have a good night and will probably see you during the week although monday is in good for me and i will be in good form by then and I could have come to your place tonight and buried my face in your hands and I wondered if the card in the envelope was written for me . . . very sweet if it was and I need that in my life as I know you do as well and I want to hold you in my arms when I see you . . . thinking of breaking it off with my ex and concentrating on you for a change for I can't seem to keep the sex thing separate from the love thing as I don't seem to be built for casual affairs and that's what scares me with you and I am sick of not getting what I need and of being so damn needy and crying all the time and thinking you would get more sleep if women you know would just leave you alone . . . and I wish I was there beside you . . . I think I am back to my regular self finally and I am on the pill and it screws up my hormones, another joy of being a woman so I thank God I have you to talk to otherwise I would just be going in circles . . .for I know these things, that's why women bake . . . oh you are so in my thoughts all the time and I will have a good sleep before I see you the next time maybe a hot tub with a good soak to think about what you said was going on in our relationship and happy we are going to be working on it together and besides the great sex I am glad we can talk about things in a positive manner and I appreciate your responses, in fact your positive approach to our relationship and your tenacity are the qualities that I really like in you and spending time together in different sexual situations will help as well but . . . is all the pain I go through worth feeling like this oh and I had a fantasy coming to see you in a public place with my black boots on and a little skirt with no panties on and sitting on your hand again because sometimes the playing is more fun than the sex and oh, no anxiety, guilt or second thoughts here and I enjoyed the spanking so see you soon and this time I get to come three times and oh again, a special relationship hint: a woman likes to receive a letter or a phone call the next day after she has been fucked by a man or made love to or just plain pleased and what a pleasure it was . . . where are you on the thinking end of things and I want to drive toward you on secret streets, kiss you in the warm night you big strong man whose only purpose in life it is to please me, wrap my tongue around you and hold you in shivering ecstasy, eating the food you offer, your smile melts my heart catching the liquid in my open hands . . . oh for you will be rewarded as I come home with a large relaxed feeling and sensation in my hips, kinda like they had been disconnected, aches in muscles I didn't know I had until I met you . . . no borders, no limitations, my eyes shut tight, your hands cover my mouth just aching to bite and cry out and smile at the same time or maybe suspended over the Japanese restaurant dripping love in the rice you are eating but I reiterate my earlier warning that you don't take me seriously, just take me . . . seriously, please and I wonder what you are doing whether you are thinking of me, dreaming, catching up on your sleep, making tea in your kitchen, writing poetry at your table, wild plans for us in the future making love on your bed, being silent . . . I get wet just thinking of you with me, makes me shiver with anticipation thinking about the next time melting in your arms and you will melt and now you know why women bake and I want someone who will lose control with me, scratch and bite and take me up against a wall without first folding his clothes at the end of the bed, a man with no sense of possible loss for humanity, diminished when we have no passion bigger than ourselves, defining the life we live in and spend time looking forever it seems for this mission of bigness when all we need is a hug and a kiss, your hug and a kiss to pull oneself away from the abyss, to drop below freezing in the summer sun, in your glow, cooling with emotion, a passion just before sunrise and awakening . . . I want to walk down the street, peer in your window, see you getting out of the dark side of jeans as the moon comes through the curtains and bounces off your cloudy day hair . . . oh God I must stop and rest and then head over to your place but first tell me your fantasies and I will give you something to write about for we will grow old together, sit in your kitchen, drink oolong tea from the tea pot I bought you, laugh at our own jokes, share poetry and stories while the cat caresses the arch of my foot and I think of waking up with you beside me, dream of your body under me, feel your hands on my throat, taking me from behind, making me laugh and

cry and gasp, you are the master, I am the good girl who worships you and you worship me, every hole a playground, every toy a weapon, every rule broken . . . but now slow your breathing and don't be afraid of this love letter for I have decided that I do love you, it overrides my sometimes jealous and angry heart and smiles longer than you smile when I see you happy with others or happy just to see me for we are going to be the best of friends and members of our own secret society, so don't be afraid of love letters, read them or save them or burn them . . . it's the thought that counts and my thoughts are with you, warm hugs and tea anytime. Enjoy (me). Alice.

## **DON'T BLAME THE STONE?**

Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Six-year-old Sarah fell on the hard grey sidewalk, scraping red her bare knees. Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me . . . Six year old Sarah fell to her knees screaming on the inside less than a moment after the stone hit her in the left eye. You know that pain when you breathe in and can't seem to breathe out? Sarah felt like that. Alone and now in fear of the unknown.

Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Isn't it enough that I get teased and pushed around on the school yard? Isn't it enough that my mom has to see the cuts weekly and bully bruises? Sarah cupped her hands over her left eye, fell further forward and cried. There was no one on the street before the stone as she walked over to her Aunt's house and there was no one on the street after the stone. There was quiet and there was sobbing. The blinds were down on her Aunt's house as she sat waiting for Sarah.

Don't you know that you have ruined my childhood? Caused me to be self-conscious about my blind eye. Made me wear dark glasses to hide the visible pain. Wonder who you are? I walk on the left side of life so I can see the right side of life & sit on the left side at movies. Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Sarah fainted and the sidewalk shared her pain.

Don't blame the stone. It had been there for six-thousand Sarahs. Deposited in some glacial till during the last Ice Age. Been part of a larger rock worn down through the 40,000 seasons in the new land. The stone was just lying around on the edge of the field at the end of the street. Don't blame the stone. It didn't want to hurt anyone, particularly sweet little Sarah. A few weeks earlier the stone and Sarah had met. She was at the park, alone on the swing set when she jumped off the seat. She picked up the small smooth round green stone and carried it with her to the edge of the grass where she dropped it near the sidewalk, beside a bridle-wreath spirea. Don't blame the stone.

Sarah's Aunt got up and parted the blinds with her long, thin fingers. Sarah's Aunt looked out past the blinds and saw Sarah laying on the sidewalk on the far side of the street, sobbing. The stinging in Sarah's knees made her come to and through the tears she saw her Aunt rushing out the door, across the porch, down the steps, past the flowers, along the concrete path to the sidewalk, over the black asphalt, onto the curb and knelt down beside her. Sarah's Aunt saw the stone, the cupped hands, the bloody knees and knew. She reached out and picked her niece up and held her in her arms, close. As the stone left the slingshot just moments before and sailed through the air, it saw Sarah walking down the street. It thought about her laughter, her daily swinging and playing. The stone had seen a thousand children, but only one Sarah. Don't blame the stone.

As the stone sailed through the air, it had no idea it would have any effect on Sarah's life; her childhood, her highschool, her failed marriages, her abusive relationships and future happiness. If the stone had known all of this, it wouldn't have felt elated, sailing through the air. It wouldn't have been happy to see Sarah. Sarah's Aunt lifted her up off the sidewalk and kicked the small green stone with her foot. The stone rolled off the sidewalk and slid into the storm drain where it got wedged in a crack in the wall and remained there for forty-seven years.

Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Why did I hurt you? Don't blame the stone.

## THE EMPTY CAFÉ

Her words drift through the cigarette smoke, rising from fingers held in midair over the red café table where she sits with a friend. She had used these words before to weave the smoke strands into coherent conversations. Words move through the gray-white air in the nearly empty café, devoid of nightlife, just a few customers eating and breathing. The television is on. The video plays a Beatles documentary. Coffee cups resonate spoon stirs. She stops her well-spoken words and turns her head toward the couple in the booth across the dusty aisle. Stirring stops and sipping begins. She brings her head back into the conversation, looks for an ashtray, and finds one near his "bottomless coffee cup" as the French waiter calls it; pouring without asking, coming by without being called.

The word weaving continues for the duration of four cigarettes, three beers, two cups of coffee and -- "a hard day's night." She hadn't noticed that her friend held her other hand with his. The hand that wasn't being used for the drinks. He stroked the suntanned soft skin between her knuckles as the smoke wandered up and up, swirled about their table and nowhere else. Words and random sentences hang on smoke curls, dropped from her mouth and meander across the table. He runs the back of his fingernails along her wrist and up her forearm as she blends words and phrases into paragraphs full of purpose, coated with concern. The café had cleared of customers. The waiter returns to clear the table then left again.

She looks over to the opposite side of the table and notices his hand on hers for the first time and smiles. The staff disappears into the back kitchen. The quiet grows deeper and it was then that he noticed that she was naked. She was sitting at the table in the nude and no one had noticed. He saw her in the red glow of the wall lamp that hangs between them just above the napkin dispenser. Her eyes say everything. They are robins' egg enchanting. Her breasts rest on the table as she leans forward and kisses him on the cheek and runs her fingers through his hair. Her hand moves softly down his face. She slides along the leather café seat toward the aisle and stands up. She gathers the wafts of smoke and the words and phrases in her bare arms, steps up onto the table top and walks into the painting above the place where they were sitting. She strolled across the acrylic field and sat in the shade of the acrylic tree with half her body covered in shade, the other by sunshine, not far from a blue acrylic pond.

He brought his fingers to his lips and closed his eyes for a second. "Last call," yelled the waiter from behind the kitchen door. He emptied his glass for the last time and walked along the acrylic tiled floor and stood in front of the acrylic door of "The Empty Café".

## HIS HANDS

"You have such soft hands." Mine, she thought, are lined with life, creased and furrowed. Seven years strong. Seven long and hard seasons of landscaping, digging, planting, working wood into useful shapes, setting out stone and brick, drawing plans, loading trucks and look at me, where am I going, what am I doing?

"You have such soft hands," she repeated and lifted her head, looked him in the eyes and smiled. He was taken by surprise by the remark as he continued to hold her right hand, fingers intertwined in hers. He had not thought of her hands as rough. When he saw her, he saw all of her not just her hands. He saw softness. He saw a delicate body. They had worked together years ago and had been close friends and workmates. He had acknowledged her softness many times; a speck of dirt removed from the eye as his knuckles rested on a cheek of silk, irritation tears running down her face; comforting her against his chest when a memory of the death of her father brought on real tears, his strong arms enveloping her.

She looked deeper into his eyes and smiled, "I'm almost thirty-five and still working outside in all kinds of weather and I'm tired of it all." She looked down as her voice tapered off and turned her hand over in his. I've held a hammer more times than I've held someone else's hand she thought. Nails, wire, lumber and plants have passed through my fingers more times than I have held a human heart, more times than I have stroked my cats, cradled my sister's child, oiled my body, worn a cotton dress over my nakedness with the warm breeze rising up the contours of every man's mind's eye.

"To me, you'll always be twenty-nine." He said, unbuckling the seat belt with one hand and holding hers with the other. "When you haven't seen someone for as long as I haven't seen you, that's when you never age, never grow older." He looked at her for the first time as more than just an old workmate, more than just an old friend dropping him off at his house after a chance meeting and a quick cup of coffee. He had thought she was racing merrily about town knowing who she was and where she was going, gathering shadows about herself to keep her dreams warm at night under the blanket of thought she purchased from the people she called friends. He had worked with no one else but her for three years on a landscape crew in the city. Three years spent driving around in a red pickup truck that was their second home, their diary on four wheels, keeper of the secret heart. A secret heart that was revealing itself now, which extended out into his arms, reached around her as she sat behind the steering wheel of her car and drew her closer to him in a firm and meaningful hug. Her still velvet cheek brushed gently against his and he kissed her on the nape of her neck, squeezed her again and moved back into his side of the car.

"We'll always be friends," she said softly, and it was true. He had always been there for her. He wrote her poems to cheer her up, made her laugh, played practical jokes on her to make her mad, kept secrets she told only him, she could depend on him for anything. There had never been a reason for her to say stop phoning to say 'hello'. She was moving into a frantic working life after three years of college and just when she wanted something to change, to be different the phone would ring or there would be a knock at the door and his familiar voice would kindle the fire that warmed her memory. Now she needed his strength and the strength of his heart, his hand, his comradeship.

"We'll always be friends," she repeated without catching her breath, and that's all they ever were and ever would be. Not lovers, not as brother and sister, but as true friends. He said goodnight and let go of her sun calloused hand, opened the car door and stepped out into the cool night air. She was not thinking of him or the conversation that had filled the unexpected evening which had just passed between them. She thought about her hands. She sat back in the car seat and thought about her hands. She held them cupped in her lap to catch the tears that began to fall as she sat in the car, staring at her hands, remembering.



## THE RECEIVING ROOM

The small receiving area at the university book room was crowded with low, black tables, cluttered with books processed in either coming or going, upstairs or down, specials or textbook, medical or children or adult categories. The constant hum of the two fans and the air conditioners added little to the white monotony of the ceiling and walls. The shuffling of papers, the classical distance of the radio and the occasional thud of a box of books on a table were the only sounds to break the noise of this silence. Shippers and receivers can dream of kings and dragons and paupers. A gallery of historical dreams. A galley full of paper dreams and in it, nightmares imbedded in cardboard and transformed by memory, divorced from the detail of before and after. The titles of the books passed out of the boxes and through the fingers of the men who worked these tables, were enough to stimulate even the weakest mind. Many times in as many days were there pauses in reflection and inspiration among these men. Sly smiles and widened eyes were to be seen while their imaginations were turning things over in their heads.

In front of the longest table (a table used for the largest returns and orders) worked a three man crew. The other tables had one man each. They were spaced unevenly around the room and facing a different wall so that no one man could see the other without moving drastically from one side to the other and inside each man, the heart wearied of the monotony. The crew were busy counting, erasing, boxing and processing a large number of books at a steady stoic pace. The constant breeze of the fans lifted the edges of loose papers on the table and on the shelf above and laid them down again in a steady rhythm. Up and down like the hands of the three man crew, lifting and pricing, lowering and erasing, lifting and counting and dreaming, lowering and dreaming.

Someone had placed their face on the xerox machine and photocopied their profile with a knife blade against the throat. It was taped to the wall above the table. Empty boxes of all sizes and shapes filled the cluttered floor in the aisle leading to the textbook sales area, where racks upon racks upon racks of sleeping books awaited another fate.

The stock control computers were idle after sixteen thousand entries and across the room, directly under the fans, were five tables piled ceiling high with boxes of unsorted, unprocessed books waiting for the chance to be sold, dreaming their own dreams, full of their own stories, screaming color. The other men at the different sections of the room, followed their own routine, quiet and supreme in their little worlds, sublime..silent.

There in the distance of their minds, a real sound breaks the silence. The sound of truck engines and the rattling of the automatic doors opening and in robotic unison all seven men form a line, a human chain, unloading the truck of its brown load of double dark brown boxes, passed from one pair of strong arms to the next set of hands and on to the conveyer belt at the back of the room. A few minutes later the door closed and the brown boxes disappear into the second floor storage area. The seven men, faint smiles, idle chatter, return to their work stations.

There are no windows in the room. There are no windows in the loading bay. There are no windows in the doors and there are no reflections on the floors and the books in the boxes are still screaming. They take their jackets off, shed their hard outer covers... SCREAM... in all the languages of the world. That other world, not this sterile one. The fans increase their noise to hide the screaming. Several men turn their heads and answer someone they thought they heard call their name. Someone says to shut off the radio. Some of the men didn't even hear it. The boxes are bursting at the seams. The books are bursting with their screams. These books are the dreams of men, these seven men, this cities men. These exploding boxes, cardboard ripping and disintegrating in a flash. These colors splashing prisms on the walls, ceilings, and floors. Animals and cars and fictions bursting, life and death springing forth from the boxes of books. The letters flew off of the words which flew out of the books and filled the white room and the vacuous minds of men, enlightening the world like a long sleep waking and the dust in the tear's of God fills the eyes of the strangers.

## GABRIEL GARCIA

### *A dream after reading: One Hundred Years Of Solitude*

The large green and blue parrot pulled his satiated penis out of Renata Garcia as she lay sleeping on the white roof of her empty hacienda in the indolent village of Macondo. A village of 20 adobe houses built along the banks of a crystal clear river.

She awoke half naked as the great bird let out a scream and flew out of sight. Covering herself from the sunlight, she stumbled downstairs to dress. She crossed the courtyard to her sister's house and related the strange recurring dream she had every night since her husband had disappeared. Renata's older sister led her to the backyard pool to cool off. She splashed water on her face then leaned back to feel the warm sun. The summer heat replenished her soul, giving her newfound strength.

When Renata returned to her own house later that afternoon, she sat on the porch shaded by the Kapok tree her father had planted when he was a young boy. Around the time his father had taken him to the market to discover ice with his friend, Aureliano. The parrot returned at dusk holding a locket in its beak. It contained the tintype photo of Gabriel Garcia.

The great parrot laid the locket at the feet of the young, frightened woman with the skin the color of the desert. It wasn't until the evening stars began to shine that she lost her fright. The birds did not fly in the dark after sunset and her fear subsided. She gathered enough courage to open the locket. At the sight of her husband's picture, she fainted, not waking until morning light. When she awoke, she wondered where the bird of her dreams came from and how it had come across the locket.

Night after sleepless night, the parrot flew from the jungle bringing jewelry and letters from Gabriel Garcia to lay at her feet. The dreams stopped Macondo baked under the sun. Her longing for her husband returned. She loved him so much that her heart ached. The unanswered questions of his disappearance, these strange new letters, and the parrot trying to tell her something with each gift - it had all left her feelings exhausted, with the exception of love.

The night came after tears, and with the dawn came the parrot with another of her husband's belongings. His wedding band. The ring Renata had slipped on his finger the day Macondo was a festival of color for their wedding. Her heart pounded. Her fear and awe of the great bright bird had subdued long enough for her to grab the parrot by the head and kiss it firmly on the beak, whispering in its ear, "Give my love to Gabriel." Her energy sapped, she fell into a deep sleep as the parrot flew over the river, across the wheat fields and past the village. The midmorning sun woke her the next day. The hot sun rested behind the shadow of a man, who reached down to lift her. He carried her into the house and lay her gently down on the cushions that covered the clay tiles in the main room. She awoke in the arms of her lost Gabriel.

The joy of love filled the house and Macondo gave a festival to celebrate the return of Gabriel Garcia, a festival longer and more colorful than their wedding that had filled the entire week. The streets were lined with dancers and musicians and the tequila never poured more freely.

They were happy, together again and over the next few months Renata grew with child and the dreams returned. Dreams of flying. Dreams of Gabriel. Dreams of solitude. The child growing in her body wanted to be born, she could hear it beg and the tale has now been told of the birth of a child holding an egg.

## **HAPPINESS AND SORROW**

I would like to personally ask Happiness that if she was not there why should she be replaced by Sorrow? The shock or loss of Happiness at a very young age can place a strain on the heart and mind of a teenage girl that should not know Sorrow for a long long time. Standing on a dusty road in a white dress, one arm outstretched toward home. The other arm drawn further down the road away from youth, from Happiness and Sadness but certainly not Sorrow.

Happiness replied that she was there all along. Going down the road to school, to friends, to parties, to parents. Happiness replied that her and her sister, Sadness, travel together hand in hand. That's life. That's living but certainly not Sorrow.

Happiness and Sadness followed the youth across the pond and turned into youth and old age. Growing up too fast to reach back with that free arm and drag happiness and youth along with her. She spends many years reaching but her arms shrink to her side as she cradles two new lives, new Happiness and Sadness but certainly not Sorrow.

Happiness and Sadness take over peoples lives and old age steps aside or moves on close to home. For many years Happiness takes over her life and she is smiling and her children are smiling in a photograph tucked away in an album brought out after seeking memories of Happiness.

Sorrow seeps in slowly up behind her and hides in the synapses of the brain. Sorrow picks away at memories good and bad, confusing itself with Happiness and Sadness. I'd like to ask Happiness why she wasn't stronger, laughing louder, reaching towards the sun on a sunny day?

Happiness said she was there all along, particularly now when she sits alone, feels alone, works alone, searches for love alone but not always lonely. Happiness says she invites Strength and Hope and Tenderness and Freedom to help her get back the Loss Of Time. Happiness mainly invited True Friend and True Positive Love. These strengths are conquerors of Sadness and allies of the smile, beaters of the strong heart, life of a lover, a sword embedded in stone. Lean on me from now on said Happiness. I am in the harbors and the small towns, distant cities, in your room, in your eyes and in your heart. She said I am here when you sleep. I am the only one here for you now, certainly not Sorrow.

## THE GREY WOLF

The sun began to set over the summer forest of Algonquin Park as the older Grey Wolf walked up to the edge of the cliff overlooking Whitefish Lake. Three hundred feet below in the oncoming twilight a campfire was being lit, canoes crossed the lake from the small island to the far most shore and its small row of cabins, campers and hikers who have left the abandoned railway tracks for the Canoe Lake Campgrounds. Grey Wolf looked over the edge of the cliff at his world and sat down on his hind legs. He gazed out at the setting sun and felt at ease and in control of his life. Such as the life of a wolf is.

He shook his massive grey head in the breeze as the heat from the sun dissipated and its red/orange glow accented the forest like an old Tom Thompson or A.Y. Jackson painting. On the beach below the Junior Forest Rangers were building their last campfire for the month. They were heading into the distance to the new Expo '67 in Montreal for three days, in the morning. Three glorious days away from planting trees, mosquitoes, black flies and clearing brush along the Algonquin Park highways and roads. But also three days away from the two cabins on the other side of the lake. Girls their own ages were there for the summer teasing and canoeing and just being girls. The tall lanky seventeen-year-old Junior Ranger threw some dead Spruce branches onto the fire which made his red hair look even more red. He was the one who would miss the girls across Whitefish Lake the most. Well, one girl in particular had caught his eye. The fire rose up enough to get Grey Wolf's attention and spark a memory of forest fires he did not want to remember. Farther away even still, the tall lanky Junior Forest Ranger's future ex-wife was born at that moment.

With the receding sunset came the deepest royal blue sky in its wake and the stars came out and began to light up the land on a moon scale and pepper the lake with diamonds. Whitefish Lake sat there in the growing moonless darkness like a giant purse with the Ranger's road as its handle, the fire as its clasp and the island its only decoration. Each tree a neat skilled stitch around the perimeter. Sitting as if it were resting along the abandoned CNR rail road tracks.

Grey Wolf took notice of the receding sun, the boys on the beach, the smells of the night air, and waited. He had been waiting, or at least returning to this cliff top every night for two weeks, waiting. He waited for his mate to return. She was off somewhere in the forest hunting or lost or chased away by Man or other forested beasts. Grey Wolf knew she would return and she had. She was just coming out of the brush that hides the underbelly of the forest on the edge of the clearing on top of the three hundred foot cliffs. . . one step at a time. She crept up close beside him in a small wolf way. Grey Wolf stood up on all fours and smelled the air. He knew she was there. She got down on her front paws and raised her tail and hind legs in the air hoping he would want her in a wolf-love way. Then she moved beside him so that she was with him finally. She sat down on her hind legs as he was now doing. The evening sun set. The sky was star black. The lake still and the air crisp and then . . . the howl.

## MIRAGE

The hunger of my curiosity was too great to stop me from going over and talking to a small group of young people, standing in front of the display window at Black's Cameras, in the Eaton Center. Three men with short hair cuts, dressed in black jeans and long-sleeved denim shirts and black leather boots and two teenage girls dressed all in white milled about in front of the store and discussed the possibility of setting up a small studio and photo gallery in a nearby abandoned fire hall. They gestured wildly with their hands as they explained to each other the good and bad qualities of this enormous building. Their voices drifted up and down the mall until passers-by began to stop and stare. I crossed the aisle to where they were and introduced myself as a professional photographer, (freelance of course, no weddings or portraits) gave them my business card with my photograph on it and told them that I would like to see this old fire hall they were discussing. I knew the area well and wasn't aware of any such building. I had been doing an assignment for the "Star" only last week on the alleys and back streets of the downtown core and knew for myself from all the walking I did, that there were no abandoned fire halls anywhere near the Eaton's Center. They agreed to take me there and we strolled quietly out of the building and into the warm summer air where pimps and druggies mixed unnoticed with the up and ups heading for the opera or a concert at Massy Hall with the tourists.

Evening was setting in as we made our way east on Dundas Street towards Jarvis and stopped at a large Brownstone building on a small side street that I had not seen before. We went in to look around. I could see no exit bays for the trucks, however the old building was full of fire poles, rubber boots and other fire gear. The smell of mould and the thickness of the dust gave me the distinct impression that it had not been used for a long time. The five young people kept to themselves as I wandered around the empty building getting a feel for the place and no answers from them to my numerous questions.

It was an hour later before we started to leave. One young man and one of the girls said they were going back downtown and walked away from the group. I left with the remaining two men and the second young woman. Their small talk and discussions were far removed from the photographic ones of the early evening as we walked down the deserted street with nothing decided about the abandoned building. The two men who were walking ahead of us turned a corner and were seen no more. The girl asked me to walk her home, although she never was specific as to where her home was.

We walked along the dark tree lined street and as we did her hair began to grow and her breasts and arms and legs began to mature at an alarming rate. Her clothes fell to the ground and she stood naked before me. Her moist lips and erect nipples beckoned me to quench the thirst in her eyes. The closer I got, the older she became. After midnight I kissed her wrinkled brow as the flame in her heart receded. By dawn her breasts sagged and her head slumped back as I picked the aging lifeless body up in my weeping arms and protected her against the strong wind whipping around us. I held on to her until my hands were filled with her dust and the morning sun rose over the city eating away the shadows of the night.

## **A STRANGE AND WONDERFUL PRESENT**

Years before his father had died, he had given him a strange and wonderful present. At that time, Yarenyaw Evolii was just a small boy who had arrived in Montreal from the 'old country' with his father, Sernii. They had traveled into the dense countryside of early twentieth century Ontario to live on a small farm near Ottawa. Yarenyaw had kept this strange and wondrous present in a large box in the closet at the back of the two bedroom farmhouse his father had built by hand out of the dark Ontario forest. The box took up most of the closet space but it was worth it, for he would pass this gift onto his first born child.

On his sixteenth birthday his father had traveled into the town of Kingston so many miles away to buy tools and supplies. Sernii felt that by now, his son was old enough to look after the farm. He returned at the end of the week he had gone with a smile upon his bearded face as he drove the wagon down the dirt road from Perth and up to the house. Sernii and Yarenyaw unloaded the heavy wagon and when the goods had been put away, one large box was left unopened. Sernii told his son to wait and open it in the morning.

It was the thrill of that morning that raced through his mind now, six years after his father's death. It was eight years after that eventful morning when he awoke and went downstairs to see this thing that up until now, neither he nor his father had seen or heard of before.

Tied to the end of a long thin string which floated about two feet from the ceiling was a three foot wide, helium-filled balloon. It was secured to the floor with a fire place log. Memories poured in as he recalled how he stood in amazement at this thick skinned floating object; it remained in the house for weeks. The balloon was eventually put away in a box in the closet where it would be taken out on special occasions. It even stood at the back of the church when he was married.

Yarenyaw was sitting on the front porch when he saw his wife, Lynn, and their four-year-old daughter, Taran, coming back in the wagon from his in-law's farm. They were laughing and having such fun that he felt that now was as good a time as any to give his special gift to his daughter.

The balloon still floated but the skin began to crack and it was only two feet wide now because of gradual leakage over the years. He stood, waved to them as they came into view and then he went back inside and took the box out of the closet. He took the balloon out of the box and headed for the front door.

The spring wind blew across the trilliums and across the wheat fields and caressed Taran's face with its warmth. It was this same wind that caught the balloon's fragile old string on the door hinge and broke it as he ran out to greet his family and give the strange and wonderful present to Taran, who jumped down from the stopped wagon. Her eyes opened as wide as a hollyhock as the balloon swept across the yard, between her and her mother and over the fields and up into the billowing white clouds until it was nothing but a pin point in the endless sky.

## **APARTMENT ON BATHURST STREET**

When I walked into the room and saw the Christ-child leaning against the wall and Picasso's Face of a Young Boy staring at him with unblinking solace, I knew the music that had once known no bounds was in here under the tangle of leather and cloth.

Two prints of famous paintings sat as if stranded in an old gallery when closed, separated by an unfamiliar Turner landscape and torn between the legs of a plastic Rococo table at rest. The music of three decades of love rested on the pillows in the corner of the room. My presence was not enough to rekindle its flame, to lift it off the cluttered floor; drag it screaming from the closet, from beneath the dust of Zion.

Even when a tapestry fell from the window the light was not enough to strike the chords of this music's discontent for piled high above its edges were mountains of pillows and plastic, wood and towels, sweaters no longer keeping out the cold nor keeping in the warmth of this dead womb-hearth. Behind the Christ-child was the real child. Caught between two worlds. Caught in this cluttered room. Sealed in a photograph and framed in steel, smiling. He will be seven forever and the eighth notes and the bars and staffs accumulate at the bottom of the glass between the photograph and the outside world. The music of life held in this child's smile so long it cannot escape through the glass in the photograph behind the Christ-child staring at the Picasso.

## MESSENGER

"So it sounds like you will be ok financially for a while when your Income Tax comes in, in a few months. So sweet of you to think of getting me a gift. I am so glad we got together this morning before I went to work."

"NP, it was the least I could do for such a wonderful woman. I should give you most of the six thousand dollars just because you are you LOL."

"Now perhaps I could be your kept woman? LMAO."

"All the stuff I feel about you I should have helped with sooner but we were just getting to know each other. The time was not right then but it is now :- ) (smiley face)."

"I know. I guess I was a bit impatient. I am sure it will all be ok . . . I will be back online soon, going on a break now. TTFN."

"Ok," he wrote on the Messenger screen and shrunk the page down to the bottom of the monitor and brought up the movie he was watching. His eyes wandered rhythmically to the bottom of the monitor to wait patiently for the orange light to indicate that she was back online. Orange light!

"HI ;- ) (wink)."

"Hi," he wrote back after enlarging his Messenger screen. "How was your break?"

"OMG, way too quick and now I am backed up with calls. Am I interrupting a movie or something? Ping me when you have a moment."

"NO, it's almost over. I'll put it on pause. Some guy is being thrown off a roof with a noose around his neck. LOL."

"Who?" she said, putting a few calls in the quay.

"Some weird movie called Hard Candy. I thought it was a drug movie, you know - Candy . . . LOL I thought it was some uplifting or adventure type thingy or something."

"Oh, that one. It was his misfortune to pick up the wrong kid to deal with. It is a good story though and I almost felt sorry for the creep . . ."

"Yes, until the confession at the end. I'll let you get back to work as it sounds like the weekend finally got busy. I am going to take a P break, stretch my legs and finish the movie."

"I'll miss you while I answer these last few calls and catch up on about 80 e-mails. It's a good thing I parked indoors because it looks like the winter is finally upon us," she IM'd. She looked out her second floor office window as the flurries began to obscure the street lights. "So enjoy the movie. I love you."

"I love you too and enjoy the last fifty minutes of work. You can call me, if you like. :- ) (Smiley face)." He shrank the Messenger screen and finished the movie. He got up to stretch his legs and looked out the window for the first time this winter evening. He turned up the sound on his computer speakers to hear the Messenger ping if she were to come back online while he wandered into the living room. Just as he sat down on the long gold and red couch, the phone rang.

"Can you come and pick me up tonight?" was the first thing she said as he held the phone up to his ear. He didn't even have a chance to say hello. Her shaky voice penetrated the almost quiet of his apartment. Only then did he notice the strong wailing wind outside and the cold seemed so distant from the inside.

"Sure, I'll take the next bus if it arrives on time and meet you right after work and drive you home. Is that what you had in mind?" He glanced at the clock on top of the TV stand above the Play Station console where they would play Little Big Planet if they were together on nights like this.

"Yes, please meet me at the back door of the large green tower on King Street where you usually meet me," she said quickly. "I've been working all weekend alone and the last night is terrible. I keep seeing people in the building that weren't supposed to be here, hearing little noises and things. The only sanity has been you being online for three days and talking to me on MSN Messenger. I can't wait to finish my shift and get out of here. Eleven pm at the back door please, sweetheart." She began closing down her computer and the office connections. There were really six people working the weekend shift but five were in Toronto and she was the only one in London.



"Ok, bye, see you soon." If he caught the 10:30 bus he should be downtown by eleven pm even if the storm didn't let up on this dark February night. Twelve inches of snow had already fallen over most of southwestern Ontario and was heading up the east coast. It was already fifteen minutes after ten. He closed down the computer and got dressed. His new boots engulfed his brown slacks too just below the knee so he didn't have to worry about the snow and cold. He threw on his large yellow sweater and red wool scarf under his winter coat. He locked the door to his apartment and headed across the parking lot to the bus stop.

The Number 12 bus was on time and barely visible in the heavy blowing snow. It lumbered through the suburbs ending up downtown in exactly a half hour from when he boarded it. He got off the bus and pulled his hat on tighter and zipped the coat up to his chin. He made his way across the street to the large green office towers and trudged through the drifts and wind to the back door. He only had to wait ten minutes for his girlfriend to get off work and see him standing there.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said as she opened the large glass doors and made her way over to his arms. She was the only warmth he could feel in this cold night and wind. "I parked in the Convention Center parking garage again," giving him a big hug and a kiss. "Let me tell you, it's spooky over there, you know, people hanging out or making deals this late at night regardless of the weather." She looked up lovingly at his smile, and took his arm as they made their way across the street. They pushed through the snow past the city plows and four-wheel vehicles that were foolish enough to be out on a night like this. They entered the parking lot on the far side of the street without realizing it and in the blinding snow, made their way across the drifts and concrete barriers toward the underground entrance. Its small green light was the only thing that could be made out in the howling weather.

Arm in arm they pushed against the wind as the Convention Center snow plow pushed them up against the wall. The spring thaw would find her wrapped in his arms with no more need to protect her from the noise and the icy blast of winter. They had gone home a long time ago.

## TORONTO AND OTHER LIVES

The heat only increased the moisture on the window of the Greyhound bus at the York Street Station. As the seats filled up and the din died down he numbed out the noises and pulled out a book of short stories to read on this midwinter trip to Toronto. He sat next to the window wishing the seats were farther apart as he wedged his long legs behind the chair in front of him. The smell of diesel began to seep into the bus and the driver closed the door, putting the tickets away in his briefcase. He began his own repetitive journey.

The bus pulled out of the station and after it went under the Via Rail tracks at Richmond Street, turned easterly along Hamilton Road. Hamilton Road below Adelaide was the old working class and now working class Portuguese section of London, Ontario. The in-town drive wasn't conducive to relaxing or reading so he just gazed out of the grey, cloudy window and watched the dark brick houses and businesses pass by him for a long time. The bus eventually turned south onto Highbury Avenue and headed for the 401 East.

White. Don't focus your eyes and your concentrated stare is clothed in white. Winter snow white. Open your eyes and the white is spelled by bare branches and fields left fallow with stalks of dead plants. Mostly snow. This was an organized snow.

Her car was covered all week with about two feet of fallen snow encasing the white Buick like a marshmallow in a plowed parking lot on the other side of town. He looked down to his lap, opened the book of stories and began to read. As the turnoff to Ingersoll approached, he raised his eyes and saw the exit disappear in a curve towards Highway 19 and become engulfed in the snow that was falling and flying past the bus on the long black road away from her snow-covered car. His eyes focused on the bare rows of Hawthorn branches that lined the 401 and he tried to envision the new spring leaves and their openness compared to the transparent veil of snow and bark. Out her snow-veiled window would be a white sky and a botanical specimen of *Pinus niger*, growing outside the patio for forty years or more. Not so along the 401 where deciduous flora outnumbered evergreen. Field after field of planted and harvested snow passed before his thoughts. He continued reading. Flash fiction.

Heat bothered him more than cold. The closeness of the air on the bus and the constant hum of the fans blowing the heat around the fifty-two seats while all the passengers were wearing their winter wear, seemed ridiculous. Two hours of sitting on a hot bus dressed for the outside weather that no one would have contact with for at least the length of the trip, was not logical, but what did logic have to do with it? The cold and the snow he didn't mind for as long as he could remember. He had grown up on an island province in the far north east part of Canada where there were four seasons: before winter, winter, after winter, and summer. The bus rumbled on. The pages turned. The snow remained. She thought about cleaning off her car. She thought about a lost love who had cleaned the snow off her car on a regular basis. He didn't remain, just in her veil of memories.

The small rolling hills of southwestern Ontario could still be discerned under the blanket of snow as the bumps and furrows on the fields were not wholly blanketed. The difference between the trees and the shrubs was quite distinct now in the grey shadow of the winter sun. The V shaped Maples, the U-shaped Oaks, the crossing branches of the Sumach and Hawthorn soon blended into lines of dark with striations of light between the hedge rows and tree rows lining the highway until the bus rolled past the indolent town of Woodstock. He looked up from the book of short stories as the asphalt ramps and exits appeared more regularly just outside his window. The heaters on the bus continued their useless hum and rhythm and the large green directional signs began to increase along the 401. He would rather be out there. Out in the cool refreshing skin of snow.

She stood on the tiles in the dining room in her pink nightgown and stared out the patio door at the snow. Her apartment was very warm and she liked it that way with a small crack opened at the base of the patio doors. A small cool breeze blew in and swirled around the bottom of her nightgown. Past the tall Pine out her window, past the Russian Olive that borders her neighbours fence, past the snow, she set her gaze on the road that ran between her apartment and the farm land on the other side of the road. Snow and bare

branches and fields left fallow with stalks of dead plants. Mostly snow.

Four exits and two S curves defined Woodstock, well, along the 401 at least. Little population change since he had lived there as a teenager in the 1960's and in the time it took the bus to pass by the city, he would not have had the time to help increase the population of the town. Four exits and two curves and the bus was past the town but the snow kept falling outside his window. The towns and cities grew closer and closer together and the furrowed fields grew sparser and sparser but the veil of snow remained the same.

He was beginning to read the last flash fiction story and returned his eyes to the white pages with the black lines of words like the fields of snow just past the peripheral vision of his right eye . . . "Happiness replied that she was there all along; going down the road to school, to friends, to parties, to parents. Happiness replied that she and her sister Sadness travel hand in hand. That's life. That's living but certainly not Sorrow . . . for many years Happiness takes over her life and she is seen smiling in a photograph beside a lake tucked away in an album somewhere seeking memories of Happiness and Sadness . . . lean on me from now on said Happiness for I am in the harbors and the small towns, distant cities and even on our street, in your room, and in your heart. Happiness said I am here when you rise and when you sleep. I am the only one here for you now. Certainly not Sorrow . . ."

The bus rolled past Mississauga and Brampton and now all the fields of cold snow were gone. All the lines of trees and shrubs and fields were gone and replaced with more asphalt and green signs and yellow street lights. He put the book back in his carry-on suitcase and stared out the window as the bus rounded the 427 curves to the QEW and headed toward the bus station in Toronto.

She closed the patio door. She thought about getting dressed, turned slowly to the right and entered the small living room and sat on the edge of the couch in the warm room. She reached over and turned on the light which sat on the table beside her. She reached for the coffee cup she had placed there just the moment before. She couldn't see the snow anymore. It was just a vague memory already. She crossed her legs on the table in front of her and looked at her bright red painted toenails. The message light was flashing on the phone.

There is no real life on the highway, on the 401 or any other highway for that matter. There are living things on the highway though and with the humming of tires and the exhaust in winter you would think that the highway was alive and breathing. Families and individuals in their automobiles, lonely transport truck drivers sitting above everybody else thinking of the ones they love or ones they are just thinking of. Animals sit in the back windows of vehicles and stare out at the snow and the humans and not knowing the language, wonder what is going on.

The real life is back off the highway where it is rarely seen by the people on the highway. Someone probably stands and stares at the highway longer than the traveller stares out the car window at the house or apartment building in their view. He wondered if he was the only one thinking of these things as he looked around the bus at all of the bored and tired passengers getting ready to get off the bus as it pulled up Avenue Road and let the first batch of people off at the Union Station stop on the west side of the Royal York Hotel. The noise of the city overpowered the slow steady hum of the bus. He looked out the window and watched intently as the students and other passengers grabbed their luggage and headed to the train station for their own connections and their own lives.

He thought about the bus being stopped in traffic on the Spadina Ramp just minutes before it drove into the city. He had thought about the woman he had loved and recently lost in the breakup of their relationship and pulled out his cell phone. As he dialed her number back in London, he looked out the window of the bus and into the eyes of the driver of the transport truck directly across from him. He too was dialling a number on his cell. They looked each other in the eye and nodded. The Greyhound bus continued on to the Elizabeth Street Bus Station and he took his carry-on suitcase with him as he walked out of the bus doorway and into the cold snow-filled streets of Toronto. He also called his daughter to let her know he was on his way to her house.

She sat on the couch for the full length of a slow cup of coffee and stared at the flashing message light

on the telephone. The distant traffic noise had died down and the only sound in her apartment was the hum of the fan on the heater. She put down the coffee cup, placed her bare feet on the rug, stood up and headed for the red flashing message light. She took the phone off the hook and sat back down on the couch, lifted the phone to her ear, punched in the pass code and hoped to hear the smile in his voice somewhere in a transport truck sitting above everyone else, passing cars and buses and other vehicles along the cold black highway.

She had two messages. The snow in her heart began to melt and she would have two road weary smiles in her ear. She put the phone down and walked over to the patio door, opened the curtains and watched the snow fall covering everything with a fresh new coat.

## RIVER AVON

She held the wine bottle between her legs. A green glass phallus more erect than even he could muster on a good day. She held the half-filled glass and toasted to his presence in the park near the Avon River. At this angle, the slope of the land beneath the wooden picnic table made the river look as if it flowed in one ear and out the other, in the distance behind her. The last of the summer sun pushed away the shade of the apple trees nearby.

She spread her black silk shawl on the table top, arranged a plate of paté, cheese and crackers next to the wicker basket as the constant breeze kept the leaves and grass moving. She had an inner "I know this wine well," look as she pulled the bottle slowly from between her legs, poured two glasses and once again, wedged the bottle between her thighs to hide prying eyes.

"I brought you a book to read. I think you might like it," he said, clinking his glass against hers to complete the toast. "It's a book of love poems by Pablo Neruda." He opened it up and read from the first page.

Where are you my love? Lost in laughter?  
The world around you holds its breath,  
Blue flowers wait to bloom.  
The sun hesitates to set unless  
it too, has your smile.  
Water bursts forth from fountains and  
rainbows reflect your face in the distance,  
down the long road from here  
and we know it's you.  
Do not feed me bread nor white wine.

Clothe me not nor sandal my feet  
on this pebble road where my skin might bleed in joy.  
I hear your smile, see your laughter.  
The day can never end, love  
unless your lips open in hearts voice,  
arms outstretched, your hands orchestrate the birds' song,  
the flowers finally bloom and the sun sets at your command.  
Your laughter ends each day of my life, love  
and wakes the dawn forever, but today  
the world stands still because we know not  
where you are, love? Where are you my love?  
Lost in laughter somewhere?

"That was beautiful! He's one of my favorite poets." She sipped her wine, running the tip of her tongue across her lower lip to get a last drop. Both mouths smiled. "What else did you bring me?" Her heart pounding ever so quickly but quiet. She loved "things." Her house was full of things, stuff, collectibles, knickknacks, junk. Masks lined the kitchen walls. Photos lined her livingroom walls and family photos and treasures crowded the piano. Flowers, dried leaves and fruits were everywhere. Upstairs, you could not see her bed for the scarves which hung from the canopy. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke and she reached forward across the table to take his hand in hers.

"Well I brought you something that is a gift and yet not a gift. It's both yours and mine and not

anyone's, yet everyone's," he said. Music began to creep across the river and into their heads as he spoke. He finished his glass of wine and she pulled the warm bottle from between her legs to fill his glass and hers again. He reached into the left pocket of his beige pants and pulled out his hand, clenched around an object she knew was there but could not see.

"Hmm, I do like surprises." She stood up, put the empty bottle back in the wicker basket she had brought, placed cheese on a cracker and moved over to his side of the picnic table. She sat close to him, crossed one leg over the other and clenched the grass under the table with the toes of one bare foot.

"Then I have a surprise for the back of your neck." He rubbed the nape of her neck with one of his strong hands and she closed her eyes. "I want to tell your neck something," she smiled as he continued. "Do you know that game you played as kids where you close your eyes and someone tells you to fall backwards and they will catch you? Well you either trusted them or fell flat on your ass."

She laughed and reached over to kiss him softly as he massaged the soft skin above the shoulder blades. He leaned forward and whispered, "Fall back in your mind and I will catch you always." He opened the palm of her hand and as he was about to place the gift there they noticed all the tourists, the comers and goers and local path walkers that were standing and staring at them. They saw that two dozen swans had walked silently over and gathered in a circle around their table. He dropped a stone into her palm and on the stone was carved the word JOY.

## ARCHING IN THE DARK

"I couldn't resist dropping you a note on the Internet this morning. I had a really nice time with you again. Sorry I had to leave so abruptly though. I will be downtown on Monday, Wednesday or Friday for the afternoons and probably to help out with closing. Hope to see you there. I love the photo you sent me and all the poetry. I know you are there helping out today and I am sorry I couldn't come by. Life keeps getting in the way. Are we being careful with our e-mailing, FOOL? I do hope to see you this week and maybe we can arrange for a photo shoot for our postcard thingy sometime. We could do a shoot at the store or Rosetta McLean Park or bring it all to a studio or something. I miss you."

Scott sat at his computer and read this note from Alice. He had spent the last five hours at the new art gallery on Queens in the Beaches area of Toronto east. He and twenty other artists and gotten together in the fall and had created an art collective. It took a month to find the ideal location. As usual, Scott took over many of the physical tasks and threw in his creativity where he could. Just before Christmas, one of the stores owners, Alice Glass was giving everyone her usual hug and goodbye at the end of the day. When she got to Scott, she tucked her head under his neck and planted a long kiss just under his ear lobe and ran the tip of her tongue across his skin. They soon became close friends and lovers. Scott continued reading the long e-mail.

"So, a short question? Why have you not activated your MSN Messenger so that we can chat live? We could chat in the morning when you get home from your real job. I have always assumed that you would be sleeping after then. I have been cleaning out my basement for a possible move from Ivy Ave & Leslie. I am hoping to sell in March and am planning on flipping houses every couple of years to give myself a part-time job. I think I might know someone who would be handy in that department . . . available for building walls, payments in hugs and kisses and who knows what else!"

Sorry I wasn't my best yesterday but I was feeling a little overwhelmed and a little lost this month over some other relationship rough spots (which I have probably invented but am feeling, nonetheless) and I am not sure where it is going to lead. Somewhere good I hope. Giving someone space is always the hardest thing to do. But you, Oh my God! Thank you for the time we have spent together. I hope I have proved to you twice this week that you are my number one Canadian poet, deserving of every literary prize and some not so literary . . . My God, if you treat all your fans as well as you treated me last night, you could expand your fan base exponentially. I hope you will continue to hold me in high esteem. I never realized the full potential of your pen. You have remarkable editing skills, oral dexterity and I hope that under your tutelage I will continue to improve in those areas as well. I must say that I was quite surprised that you treated me as an equal on both occasions. I was expecting more of a slave/master or a getting-me-back-for-being-a-tea-slave editing session. . I suppose I can be a little demanding and overwhelming for someone who is very independent, but I am trying to be less so. I seem to have a bit of an obsessive personality like yours is sometimes. Not that is wrong. I will tell you more about it when I finally gain some perspective. May your pen be so cruel, your heart so kind. Oh to be flying somewhere warm on a midnight plane . . .hugs are always appreciated. See you soon, Alice." At the bottom of the e-mail Alice had written two short poems for him:

When I am alone  
I a brazen woman fevered  
eyes wide shut, you  
hard spread me wide  
your moth, mine babbling  
bigbigbigohgod and come  
but when across the room  
think, who is this man and why  
wanting aching to be worshiped heart in hand  
feel novel kisses from questioning soul  
taste new love with tired heart.  
Heart trips a little at the door  
press spine against steel  
hard and cold  
and gather my nerve  
to go in.

drink in your love like balm  
inhale your skin like ether  
dreading what I know will come  
kiss me goodnight and  
like a skilled surgeon wielding scalpel  
sever my heart  
without scratch or nick  
and I  
long trained as your assistant  
pocket my heart and go home.



Scott loosened his belt and unbuckled his pants to relieve the pressure building after reading her erotic poems and thoughts of Alice. This is good he said to himself. The imagery of want and need and daydreaming and reality and love and infatuation and guilt and not-guilt. "Yes, Yes, this is great," he wrote Alice back in a shorter e-mail. "Damn this is great and all the others you have written. Thank you and you can wrap your legs around my waist anytime in your dreams and in my dreams and in reality. Is it hot in here or is it just me? Last night with you was wonderful and I hope I didn't hurt you? I do so hope to see you this week whenever you get into the gallery. Thursday is payday and I will give it all to you for a big wet kiss." Scott signed off and pressed the send button on his hot mail e-mail.

The weekend ended with no reply to his e-mails. Scott didn't expect any since she had responsibilities at home and white lies. He went to work on the midnight shift at the University of Toronto where he worked on the Police Force there. Monday and Wednesday he stayed awake and took the street car to the Beaches and helped out at the art gallery. On breaks he searched the street for her face in the crowds, in the passing of every person who entered the store and in each phone call that came in. Alice sent him a short e-mail on Thursday morning and he read it at noon when he woke up. It was written in her unique poetic heart and language:

"I am coming out tomorrow if you want to see me sleepy and disheveled with caffeine for a moment or two at 12:00 noon. Send me a numeral with seven digits. Otherwise, I can't call. Are you sleeping or dreaming of me? What did you do today? I know you have been working at night this month. God help us who walk the campus in the evenings. In the car today I was feeling rather liquid below the waist, comparing myself to mermaids, ruled by moon, always wet, and thinking of you going down on me with all that warm pleasure and . . . what could be better than loving a mermaid?" Alice. "PS: wouldn't it be great if I could write a poem that wasn't about sex, I could do a book?"

She floats beneath the surface  
darkness deep-en-ing  
wait with tide alone with moon  
goddess of the sea  
pale gray eyes and abalone  
cry with tide moan with moon  
fingers move with suck of waves  
she craves a net to pull him down  
lust with tide ache with moon  
he, mouth against her aching deep  
lungs on fire with captured breath  
tongue so sweet and warm and wet  
drowns with tide dies with moon

Scott got dressed and headed east to the Gallery and did some errands he had neglected the day before, then left and headed back home. Luckily it was 1:30 when he got off the Carlton street car and not being able to save money as a general rule, walked over to the Cinema and went to an afternoon movie, mouthed down a burger and a beer in Kensington Market afterwards and headed home just in time to get some sleep for another midnight shift. The last one of the week. He couldn't wait to see Alice at the gallery and steal away for a kiss or abandoned alley rendezvous.

On Friday when he arrived at the store, refreshed from a long morning sleep, went to Starbucks and bought Alice her daily tea. He walked along the crowded sidewalk past the creative writing workshop on the lawn of the Beaches Library, past Willow Fish and Chips and entered the gallery to a sea of smiles. He made his way across the floor to the office area and handed Alice her tea. She looked beautiful and is obviously feeling good to see him. He chatted with a few of the other artists but now his attention was on

her and not on conversation. His eyes and feet followed her as she went through the curtain to the private area where the coats were hung, losing her for a moment. No one noticed this closeness of friends and colleagues. They went into another small office and while his heart was in her hand, his hands were on the outside of her heart, caressing her. He lifted her up to his waist and she wrapped her legs around him for a moment and kissed him with a passion. Scott and Alice relaxed their hold on each other after a few minutes and returned to the main part of the gallery. Most of the other artists had dispersed for a coffee or a smoke outside. They took their tea and worked their day, holding hands secretly under a table or touching softly as they passed one another.

At the end of the day Alice and Scott were the only ones left to close up the store and turn off the lights. They made their way to the back room where a few chairs and a couch pretended to be a lounge. Scott sees her smile in the dim light where she is standing. The freckles on her neck stood out in the light. A woman without freckles is like a night sky without stars he thought.

"Where have you been?" Alice asked as she sat on the couch and pulled him down next to her. "I've gone to the trouble of going over the Metro Reference Library and read some of your books. Most of the poems you have written me are so sexy and fantastic, but hey, are you resting on your laurels?"

"What do you mean?", he said, feeling guilty for something he didn't know he had done. He reached across her lap and took her hand in his.

"You are falling back on your old phrases and images that I must confess worked admirably in the past instead of being in the NOW and writing for the moment and in the heart. STOP. You are not a poet in your 30's anymore, you are a poet now and you have really got to start working on it." Alice caressed his face and smiled. "My poetry is in the NOW and present and comes from my heart. Don't you find yourself reverting to the old formulas? Shake it off and dig deeper and tear the rust off your heart now, please." Alice kissed him gently on the cheek and ran her fingers down his body.

Scott's heart stopped for a moment and changed gears. It was beating at the same tempo as a good orgasm but this was the love end of sex. He knew something like this would show up at some time or other but not two months into this purely physical relationship. "Yes, you are right" he said. "I do write from the here and now but I still like some of my early stuff and tend to blend it in from time to time." Scott caressed her arm and ran his hand slowly over the freckles on her thighs. He felt like a hurt puppy and realized that love was creeping up on both of them. "I'll take more note of it, I promise." Alice gave Scott a long hug and leaned back on the soft couch.

"I hope you don't mind the tough love advice from a non-poet segment of Toronto society, and it's not like I have any idea what I am talking about. I'd like to see you happy and that means productive." Alice began to unbutton his shirt and kiss his neck. "I am a forty-one-year-old student of life." She was undressed now and pulling off the rest of his clothes as she spoke. "You are my poet prince and my oral expectations are very high indeed." Scott moved on top of her. "I crave rhyming couplets every minute of the day from the tip of my tongue to the top of my round soft ass." Tears began to run down her cheeks. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he made love to her, arching in the darkness. She had no ink at her fingertips to pen her mental feelings:

I ache for you  
your heart against my heart,  
the length of your body on mine  
nipples like pebbles as  
your heart softens my bones  
spreads me wide, fills every hungry crevice  
cleaves me in two, then mends me  
lungs bursting, coming up for air,  
fill me so I can remember

what it's like to love someone.

Scott made the mistake of not saying anything or composing a love poem in his head or his heart just yet. Alice waited and waited and waited, then exhaled.

## **RANDOM THOUGHTS ON SYNCHRONICITY AND PHRENOLOGY FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A PS3 IN A WIRELESS WORLD WITH INCOMPLETE MODEM SYNTHESIS OF AVATARS IN A NEW WORLD ORDER.**

placement of the short shorts and knee high white zippered boots below a red halter top for \$5.99 or the new bikini's can send a male avatar to buzz around speechless seeking out his own non-existent computer woody and creating foot in mouth disease in an imaginary world as he thinks of taking you to his underwater lair or tree house or yacht. Just changing your hair color and smile on a regular basis has them bewildered or when you walk into a bowling alley for a game of pool where there are few smiles or laughter only mumbling and one liner pick-up girls and boys not sure of any one else's age or sex or place of cyber birth, waiting and waiting for a spot to bowl with a friend from who knows where or shoot a quick game of bluetooth pool, you are the only ones moving while dozens of others mill about or closed down but not turned off, just immobile avatars on Home in a megabyte stance . . . dancing in khaki in front of the billboard pretending to be the pitchman for the 99 cent clothing industry which makes you a goddess, drawing cyber crowds around you and lure you home for cybergasms or one on one conversations in their clubhouse, unaware of the intelligence required to get the humor you want to convey just trying to have some quality time to yourself, and hey, there's Phrenos off in the corner looking for Materia to catch the slow train home through the cherry flowering garden on the Japan server, he sees you off in the distance teasing the crowds and begins to dance, dance the day away with unknown friends playing online games and sending text messages to his mailbox and going from this world to another little big planet in some final fantasy of life and disappears momentarily as the crowd applauds and you go shopping for another 99 cent sweater and a cute purse and another pair of shorts for your avatar, return to your sea side apartment and repair the roof glitch and sit and relax on the roof in the love seat made for two . . . wake, wake, wake for the sword wielding warriors are climbing down from the counter as you sleep, TV buzzing in the background, slip over wires and notebooks and cell phones and journals and maps, finding their way to your throne, they raise their swords and staffs and knives and poke and prod your dreams, the real ones, contemplating the synchronicity of youth and rock and roll music yet they cannot pierce your skin or your dreams and as the sun raises they return to their white tower and you awake not sure if you were dreaming or engrossed in the reality of cyberspace, your fingers tired from directing the battery dead controller at the blank hissing TV screen while you slept

## **LEVIATHAN**

At the middle age of forty-five I decided to go back to college for a change of profession from horticulture to library science. As a hobby I had been writing and publishing since my first college days at the age of twenty-three. Plus the divorce had given me more free time.

When I began to attend classes at Fanshawe College on Oxford Street East in London, Ontario, I was also involved in the local poetry scene. I had made several close friends, one of whom was the superintendent of a small apartment building on the old McLeary Estate on Grand Ave. In my 2009 apartment still sits an original McLeary refrigerator. I moved into 11 McLeary with the one year old kitten, Leviathan, which my oldest daughter Leanne, had given me when he was three months old.

On the weekends I would put a leash on Levi and go for walks around the High and Grand neighborhood. Levi never walked beside me but sat balanced on my shoulder. During the week when I got home from college or after my volunteer work at the London Community Resource Center, Levi appeared to be both agitated and quite vociferous. The weekends seemed to be fine all through the fall and winter.

In my own opinion and not from some cat book I felt that, as with a human baby, my cat needed the sound of the human voice so I left the CBC playing all day on the stereo I got from my in-laws. By the spring, Levi seemed to have about fifteen different ways to say meow as he sat in the doorway everyday after I arrived home from school. I thought he was yelling at me for being away all day. I even wrote a stream of consciousness piece "What My Cat Thinks". It was well received at poetry readings. I was soon to find out why Levi was so vociferous.

As bad luck would have it, I became slightly ill with a cold and decided one day to skip school and stay home for a couple of days. I went home to my apartment after lunch and went to bed earlier in the evening. Instead of leaving at 8:30 to catch the bus, I slept in. At about 9:30 in the morning as I sickly sat sipping tea on the living room couch, the city garbage truck reversed across the entire length of the building to the dumpster. As my apartment was in the basement at the front edge of the building, the back up beeper echoed in my apartment louder than it sounded on the outside.

I immediately had my answer to his excited yelping and mewling and daily anxiety. As the garbage truck reversed, a very frightened kitten ran back and forth from one end of the apartment to the other faster than anything I had ever seen. This had been going on each week for months. He was even afraid to get up to the windows to look out. We moved as soon as possible to a nearby apartment building and while Levi continued to talk a lot, he gradually relaxed and spent quality time in the hallway with an old Basset Hound from the apartment next door.

## **LEVIATHAN AT FIFTEEN**

When my daughter Leanne, moved into the first house I had ever owned since the divorce, she brought her large six-year-old orange male tabby Pharaoh. My, at the time, welter weight ten-year-old gray and white tabby, who had spent his life alone with me, sat on the burgundy chair. As Leanne set Pharaoh on the royal blue couch across from Leviathan, under the living room window. Pharaoh was the typical macho male cat, solitary by nature and not by circumstance. To both Leanne's and my astonishment, Levi jumped off of the chair, crossed the floor, jumped up on the couch and curled up against Pharaoh and began licking his head and face. Pharaoh then reciprocated as if they had been best friends forever. Pharaoh's life would end in October 2014 at the age of fifteen. Leviathan made it to eighteen in April 2012, one month shy of his nineteenth.

I was thinking of this event three years later on a cold, windy, overcast and snowy weekend at my new bachelor apartment after selling my second house to bankruptcy. The apartment was situated down a gravel back alley behind the T&C Bar and Laundromat at Dundas and English in London. I heard the screen door blow open and it failed to blow shut again.

Levi sat up, startled by the sudden noise and stared at the door. I got up from the computer in the

make-shift bedroom-office-diningroom and went over to the door. I turned the silver knob and it opened to a smaller, feral, fight-scratched and snow covered version of Pharaoh. The orange mangy male cat entered the small livingroom like he owned the place and went straight to the cat food dish. He then found the bathroom litter box and returned to the livingroom where he sat on the edge of the wool rug my parents had brought back from Cairo years earlier.

In the meantime, Levi watched all of this not with a sense of territory or apartment ownership but with something I hadn't thought older cats would have, memory and a sense of trust. I saw and knew immediately that this was not my daughter's cat. Levi saw the only thing he had ever had and pushed himself off the new blue couch and headed straight for what he perceived to be his old best friend and licked his face and fur.

It took only a minute or two to realize this was no feral cat. As fight torn and scabby skinned as it was you could tell that it was a lost or pushed out the door, house cat. He reciprocated with love and licks to Levi who probably didn't know the difference then or until he died peacefully six years later at the age of almost nineteen.

The orange cat I never named. It stayed the months of January and February of 2006, much healed and improved and maybe a pound or two heavier. Unlike his new brother and friend, Levi, never seemed to grow larger or weigh more than when he was two or three years old. One day when the weather was about to break and the door was open for air and light, the orange tabby walked out the door, looked back before entering the two acre field on the opposite side of the back alley and disappeared. He never returned.

Leviathan seemed perplexed for a couple of weeks and then began hiding under the kitchen sink and looking rather sad and lonely. Upon further and more detailed inspection I found that his new best friend had left more than just memories. He had left fleas on every square inch of his fur.

I sprayed every inch of the apartment after giving Levi a flea shampoo in the tub and leaving him in the bathroom for two days to dry and recover. By the end of March he was back to his normal cat self and seemed to have forgotten Pharaoh's doppelganger and friend. One day soon, he scratched at the door, bounded onto the snowless gravel lane and walked away towards Lyle Street without so much as a goodbye.

I searched and called for him everyday to no avail. If he was looking for the orange cat or escaping the memory of months of fleas, I'll never know. What I do know is that two weeks to the day he left, he did return. This small and seemingly shy cat appeared on the Lyle sidewalk and came down the alley to the apartment steps with two much larger male cats who looked like bodyguards. One on either side and a foot back from him.

I placed dry food out on the steps until all three were fed, then the two bodyguards at some unknown signal, got up and left. Levi walked into the apartment as if nothing had happened and fell asleep on a spot of sunshine and never left home again until the day he died.

## **MONDOHUNKAMOOGA: THE SLEEPING DUCKS (#1)**

Once upon a time in the land of Mondohunkamooga, there ran a quiet river that wound its way through a large green field, lined with big trees. In the river, in the field, which ran through the land with the long name, there were hundreds of ducks floating in the water. It was night. The ducks were asleep. In the land of Mondohunkamooga, there lived a mean old man who spent all of his spare time, when he wasn't picking his nose and poking small furry animals with his cane, screaming at the ducks in the river, which ran through the field, through the land with the long name. He was rather stinky and there were small furry animal blood stains on his cane.

One night when the ducks were asleep a red-haired lady rode by on her bicycle and saw the mean old man sitting on the edge of the river yelling at the ducks. She had a cold and couldn't smell anything within 15 feet of her bicycle seat. She thought he was a magic man -- the fog just rolled in, did not get anywhere near the man, and parted in great whirls every time he raised his arms and yelled at the ducks, who were sleeping in the water that ran through the field, through the land with the long name. (We know it was the BO but she had a cold and couldn't smell anything) She thought he was a mean magic man. She threw her bicycle on the grass and walked up to the mean old man who was screaming at the ducks who were sleeping in the water, which ... well, you know the rest.

The old man didn't hear her approaching and didn't see her pick up a thick blade of grass and place it between her thumbs, stretching it tight and putting it up to her mouth. She was just a couple of feet behind the mean old man, took a deep breath and blew air across the blade of grass. The high-pitched sound echoed all over the land. She blew the thumb whistle three times as loud as she could, got on her bicycle and rode off quickly into the fog that had rolled up from the river in the field in the land of Mondohunkamooga.

Meanwhile, back on the river's edge, after hearing this ear-piercing whistle from behind him, the mean old man froze, his arms raised high in the air and his hair stood up on end and turned pure white like the fog that wouldn't come near him because of the smell. The fog disappeared, and the ducks and everyone else for three blocks woke up. The ducks flew away and the mean old man fell over, hit his head on a rock and died. Then he rolled down the bank of the quiet river and into the water and that was the last time anyone saw or heard of the mean old man who never bathed and was rather stinky, who spent all of his spare time screaming at the ducks in the river, which ran through the field, through the land of Mondohunkamooga. But it wasn't the last time anyone heard of the young woman on the bicycle. She would be riding into yet another tale in the land with the long name.

## **THE VEILED THREAT: ( #2 )**

Etoile Coeurange was a young woman who lived in the land of Mondohunkamooga. A land where the sky seemed to darken more at sunrise than at sunset and Etoile had a longing in her heart that she did not understand.

Etoile lived with her three brothers in a small red house on the hill overlooking the valley of the veiled threat. The veiled threat was a large hairless beast that came out of its hole in April and bit the people of Mondohunkamooga on the butt. It was always hiding in the ground, waiting for the security of winter when it could finally sleep.

The three brothers all slept at the foot of the only bed in the house so that their sister would have the best that they could offer -- and Etoile Coeurange was happy with this arrangement. She would never share her bed space with anyone -- including family.

The sun seemed darkest just around lunch time. The steam from the kettle cast a wall of moisture on the panes of glass, but Etoile, who was getting tired of spending all of her time at home - just wiped it aside as she did with all things that got in her way and poured herself a cup of tea. She looked out over the land of Mondohunkamooga and saw a vision. It was in a ray of sunshine which landed right in her eyes, blinding her for a brief moment. It had reflected off the water in the river that ran through the fields that made up the

valley of the veiled threat.

Etoile Coeurange thought she recognized the vision and after her sight came back, was happy and filled with a glad heart. She went outside where her three brothers and their friends were building castles in the sand and playing with toy dragons. She raised her hands in the air, rejoiced, sang and ran down the hill in front of their house to the river that ran through the fields in the land of Mondohunkamooga. When she got to the river, she looked for the ray of sunshine, but its reflection was so great that she could not tell if it was real. She knelt down by the river's edge and looked into the reflecting pool filled with the colored leaves of Fall.

What she saw scared her. She ran back up the hill to the comfort of her house, her brothers and her plush feather bed and buried her face in the pillows. When she looked up, many months had passed - it was the beginning of March. She felt as if a part of her life had been stolen from her. Etoile Coeurange ran back into the open air - which was cold now - and down to the river to find the lost ray of light, but she searched and searched for a long time only to find her own reflection in the melting ice that turned into water as the spring arrived and as she took one last look into the river the veiled threat rushed out of his hole in the ground and bit her on the butt.

Boy, was she mad - she was really pissed off- she reached around, grabbed the veiled threat, shoved it under the water until it dissolved into nothing and she was left staring at that thing that had scared her in the first place - the deep dark secret world of the evil twins: love and commitment. Etoile Coeurange struck at the water with her fist. After the water settled she saw her normal reflection and she was happy again. She walked up the hill that overlooked the valley of the ... well since there was no more veiled threat, it was just her valley so she walked proudly up the hill to the house.



## **A SHORT PACE**

The cruiser moved along the westbound lanes of the #409 cut off to the Lester B. Pearson International Airport when the middle aged woman passenger in another car noticed that the police had been following them for a long time. She had been watching out of the corner of her eye all the way from the Jane Street exit. "Harold!" She looked directly at the driver sitting beside her.

Harold didn't pay much attention to her when he was driving. He had taken the steering wheel out of the back seat a long time ago. "Harold! !" she yelled over the noise of the traffic. "The police are beside us over there and they've been following us. . What are you doing wrong. . .? Are you speeding. .? You haven't been drinking have you. . .? We've got our seat belts buckled haven't we. .?" Harold turned slowly between verbal flaying and sure enough there was an Ontario Provincial Police cruiser keeping the same pace as their car, just off to the left in the express lanes. He started to sweat a little as he kept his eye on the speedometer, the road, all the mirrors, and tried to think why the police were there. "HAROLD! ! ! H..H. . Harold. .they're m m. .m. .moving right into our lane!"

Harold's knuckles went white as the cruiser pulled up beside them and motioned them over to the road side. That's what Harold did, very carefully. He had managed to get his I.D. out and the missus didn't keep her eye off the officer as he got out of his car and walked up to theirs. "Giddy sir!" said constable Ed Silva, with a smile. "I was thinkin' of gettin' one of these new Lada's, they been ok for ya?"

## LINKED SHORT STORIES

In the winter of 2003, after spending nearly every day at the computer typing in my journals, I began a series of linked stories based on real events from the summer before I moved from Ontario, until I left Fredericton. They are, in a sense, stream of consciousness, slice of life prose as several occur at the same point in time. All are based on real people and real events and, all occur on the same day over a period of a few hours. This is a revised edition.

### May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002

Cloudy, grey, hot, rainy day. We'll see what happens. I continued to build the upstairs bedroom and fix up the backyard and garage. I had broken a hole in the ceiling at the entranceway of the house and cleaned out the old insulation, lowered the rafters to seven feet, laid a three-quarter inch plywood floor, walled in the chimney and wired the whole attic with electricity. It was now a two-story bungalow. I created a continuous airflow around the attic the next week when I put up the eighteen sheets of drywall and roof vents. It's amazing when you think that some men I know grew up with their fathers' calling the contractor or plumber and never knew or learned how to use their hands or brains when it came to basic house repairs.

The garage was mostly completed last winter when London had all that warm snowless weather. The rafters were raised to seven feet, so I wouldn't bump my six-foot five-inch frame, and lined on the inside with twelve-inch planks and drywall scrounged from a local shoe store being renovated. Opaque glass windows replaced the front double doors and after the electricity was installed, on a sunny, warm, winter day, I painted the garage canary yellow with a red and royal blue trim. You can't miss this little building as you drive up Clarence Street. Grey house, white house, white house, Bang! Canary yellow garage, white house, blue house. Last Sunday I finished the new patio deck and latticed in the bonsai garden I created at the back of the house up against the garage.

Today I decided to rest. To shower out the dust and insulation, brave the inclement weather and venture downtown for a break. I went downtown along Dundas Street to get a bite to eat and made my way over to the new market on Talbot. While I was in the area, I went into the Jan Li Gallery and my friend Jan said she was upset by a customer who was still wandering in the back of the store. This young girl had been mumbling about the death of the city and crying and rocking back and forth. Jan asked me to get her out of the store in exchange for doing some framing I had just brought in. I had found some aluminum frames on Dundas Street and needed the glass to put in them.

I walked into the show room and there, standing in the back beside a mirror, was a young woman leaning forward with her head down, face partially covered with the olive-green poncho she was wearing. She raised her face and smiled as I approached her.

"Hi. My name is Jessica White. What's yours?" she asked quietly.

"I'm Ryan," I said as I extended my hand and shook hers.

"Do you know about the prophecies? Do you know about the Bible and God?" she whispered.

"Yes, yes I do," I replied. "I know about the Robe and the Grail and the Life of Christ and many other related things." I really did, you know. I am an avid reader of world history, biographies and other real things in this world.

"That building they are putting up across the street is an evil place. This new arena is an eyesore and shouldn't be there ". . . "it is an evil place," she repeated. "I don't want to be abused in this place." Jessica smiled up at me and her tiny frame seemed to relax a bit as we (or she) talked.

Jessica didn't appear to be a street kid. She was not much younger than me and was certainly out of place in this nouveau riche art store; displaying nineteenth century art, modern bronzes, gilded mirrors and nude Roman statues. She continued to hold the hood of the poncho close to her neck as we talked. I suggested we should go for a coffee and we headed for Tim Hortons but ended up at the Grey Hound Bus Station coffee shop. Jan smiled as we left and I threw her the thumbs up. Jessica and I walked to the bottom of Talbot Street and into the station. We talked for about an hour while she cried and ate a burger and was

upset about a number of things.

Her father, whom she loved dearly, died a few months ago. I could see the despair in her eyes, like a hole had opened up in her heart unexpectedly and wouldn't close. Like the dull yellow color of this greasy-spoon restaurant, dulling the flavor of the food. Jessica spoke in a whispered voice.

"God, I can't believe he's gone. It's been three months already and I still wake up and start crying, knowing he's not going to be there. Mom gave me his ring," she said weeping slightly, holding my hand for a moment. "I wear it all the time. When I'm scared about something I look down at the ring on my finger and I start feeling better. I know even if I had one more day with him, it would never be enough. The worst part is that we had plans together. If only someone I knew were okay with dying, I might be okay."

"I think I am ok with dying," I said. "I lost my father five years ago on new Years Eve and it took me almost half a year to stop the heavy grieving. Now I just take a day here and there, once or twice a year to think about him and my two brothers."

"Do you know how quickly this world expects people to get over the grief of their loved one?" she sobbed.

I reached over and wiped the tears from her face with a clean napkin. She pulled back her hood to reveal a pretty but wet, oval-shaped face with short cropped brown hair. "I had a dream at the end of that first six months after my dad died," I said, "and in the dream I was standing in the living room of his old house in Woodstock and there was a huge hole in the floor. My dad was there. He threw a rope down into the darkness and began to climb into the hole. 'Be right back' he said and disappeared." My eyes were beginning to fill up with tears. "After that it was like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. From my heart. I am ok with it now," I said.

"I only wish I had his arms to hold my head as I cry on his shoulder." She spoke softly. "I feel I have let him down. I haven't been what he wanted me to be . . . I feel like a failure."

She kept on talking. Mumbling sometimes and constantly rubbing her chest. Her father's death was not the only blow to her heart and health. Her two month old daughter had been taken away by Children's Aid three weeks ago and her nine year old son had rejected her as a parent and is a real brat. Four months earlier, her ex-boyfriend burnt her in the hotel room where they were staying with a cigarette and now, she hadn't eaten in three days. And the list went on.

I brought her over to my house and made her a spaghetti supper. She took a long shower and when she said she was sore all over, I gave her a massage for about an hour. She was totally trusting and seemed to fall asleep for a bit.

Afterwards we walked uptown and along King Street to see a 9 p.m. movie. As we passed the Richmond Hotel, she almost demanded, "let's go in there." She sat at the table in the low end bar and started shaking and mumbling and went into a bit of a trance. Jessica pulled her hood over her head and held it tight around her neck. I didn't know what to do or say. She then went into the washroom for about twenty minutes. This, I found out later, is the hotel where she was staying with the guy that burnt her. I left and walked home. She came over to the house two days later and apologized.

A month later my tenant, Barb Painter, was really uncomfortable with my helping Jessica. She has her own life. Comes and goes as she pleases and even though her and my new friend, Jessica, are close in age, Barb is like a little mother hen around the house, questioning everything I do. Barb is back to drinking all the time. The other day it was 31 degrees out and she had on shorts and a small top. She had her hair in pigtails and looked like a perky-breasted eighteen-year-old. I waved and said when she comes home this evening we would get married and winked at her. She thought my humor was disgusting. I went to sleep in the early afternoon and then off to work at the Post Office on midnight's. When I got to work, the supervisor handed me a letter for full-time employment. I accepted it.

Two weeks later and full-time has been quite good. My back hurts a bit still but I am getting by. I preferred the five-hour part-time shift as it gave me time to do things during the day. Jessica called from Ottawa.

"Hi, it's Jessica."

"Hey, did you find your father's grave site?"

"No. My stupid bitch grandmother said I wasn't in the will but I was. I wandered around for two days in the stupid graveyard and couldn't find the stone. I was so depressed. I wanted to talk to him and now I can't."

"Where's your Mother? Is she in Ottawa as well?" I asked.

"No, and I don't care where she is. I was robbed at the Sister's of Mercy and three girls assaulted me. I don't wanna stay here anymore. Can you give me some money to get home?"

"Sure," I said. "I spend money on you to keep you safe but you keep running into the wrong people . . . I worry about you and want to keep you safe."

"I know you do. I love what you are doing for me. Can you put some bus money in my account. You still have the number don't you?"

"Sure do, see you when you get in," I said dreading and wishing to see her again. When she arrived in London we went to a motel for the day. We took a shower. I saw no bruises as she had said. Her body was bruise and scratch free. I got dressed and bought some groceries for her. When I returned she was still in the shower and, as if I was never there in the first place, yelled at me to stay out and leave the food and she would call me later.

Towards the end of June, Barb Painter had been acting strangely, drunk every night and bitter about me helping Jessica. She was also upset about the hot water being off for two weeks. We had been having to boil water for baths. I had been paying the utilities on my own schedule of payments and not on theirs, which was pay it all or else. Now we were feeling the effects of the else.

My best friend, Jack, came over one day and took Barb for a coffee. She told him that she thought I was having sex with Jessica, which wasn't true. Jessica came over last night and slept at my place on the couch.

On Saturday I painted the entire living room and dining room. It is now changed from Burgundy to ice blue. Jessica moved out to stay at a female friend of hers. No gratitude, just want, want, want.

By the middle of July, I had planned to do renovations at my friend Christine English's place when Jessica called and was needing comfort and a friend and a place to stay. I canceled the renovations and we went to St. Joseph's Hospital for an appointment she had and then took the bus to Masonville Mall. She gradually became bossy and paranoid, thinking people were talking about her and us. We got ice cream cones and then went back downtown. I got her a room at the Super 8 Motel and she said she would see me tomorrow. She got mad at me for picking up her luggage at the bus station and I did not hear from her again.

On Friday, I went to 8 East at the Victoria Hospital to see Jessica. She had phoned and said she was admitted there. Her doctor said she was found wandering the east end of London, mumbling and wrapped in a quilt. It was my old Hudson Bay car blanket I had loaned her but knew it would never be returned. She was suffering from heat stroke and dehydration. He said she was not taking her medications and they couldn't keep her any longer. I brought her a few things and she said she should get out on Saturday. I told her I would get her a place to stay. Again.

On the first day of August, Barb moved out. Left most everything. Jessica has been costing me about \$600 putting her up in motels to keep her safe. Jessica came by at 3am with her brother and drove to Ottawa. She had come over for two nights and then disappeared for three days after they released her from the hospital. Barb finally moved all her stuff out of the house and returned her key. I spent the morning cleaning the kitchen and the bathroom. What a mess!

Jessica came back after being away for two weeks and is sleeping in the back room. She showers again constantly. Some psychotic spells but not as bad. I came home after a weekend with my girlfriend and Jessica was so happy. She had wanted to do something nice for me for letting her stay at my place. She dragged me into the den and spread her arms wide and said with a huge smile on her face, "Look what I did

for you!" She had arranged all of the shelves in my library by book color! Every shelf was one color range with the reds and greens on one side and the yellows, blues and whites on the other rows of glass shelves. I just stood there dumfounded and didn't know whether to be happy or sad. I just smiled and gave her a hug. The next week I put my house up for sale so I could move to New Brunswick against everyone's wishes. I had accepted the job transfer to Fredericton and have been getting the house ready for rent.

It's nearing the end of August and Jessica has still been here. We got into a discussion about her money that she owes me, or at least promised to pay back. I asked her to leave last Wednesday evening and in the morning she was gone. She then came back at 1 or 2 in the morning and had a 45 minute shower.

The next day I painted the attic room, back room, and front hall. I went out for the night. Jessica came back late in the evening. She ate and took another long shower and left the bathroom door open. After 30-40 minutes I asked her to cut off the shower and about 10 minutes later asked her the same thing. When she said no, I went into the basement and shut off the water valve to the whole house.

Well! She went absolutely crazy! Jessica jumped naked out of the shower and came into the kitchen livid with anger. She hit me with her fist on the head and yelled and screamed that I wasn't her friend. That nothing I had done had ever helped her. She was raped and assaulted because of me. She hit me again. I was totally stunned by this behavior. I was also surprised by the strength in her tiny body. I picked her up and put her back in the bath room. I walked into the livingroom to call the police when Jessica rushed out of the bathroom and hit me on the back and over the head with the plunger handle a couple of times. I fell to my knees, stunned by the hateful blow. The police were on the line and sending someone over. Then she went into the kitchen and grabbed a steak knife and came at me. I grabbed her wrist below the knife with my left hand and lifted her up in the air with my right arm. I swung her around in a circle five times and the brief dizziness disoriented her a bit. After this moment calmed her down I plopped her dripping wet body back into the tub of hot water. About a half hour later two female police officers came by and took her away. I found the knife on the tub ledge where the police officers hadn't noticed it. Guess they were lucky she had calmed down and not vented her anger at them!

September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002

My 40<sup>th</sup> Birthday. I spent most of the weekend with my girlfriend and didn't tell her or anyone else about the recent attack at my house. I just needed to get away and relax. I spent most of my birthday cleaning and renovating for the tenants to move in. I stored all my extra stuff in the garage and tried to find my cat who had disappeared for a week with all the bad karma around the place. Tomorrow the cat and I are . . .

## LEAVING LONDON

Standing on the shoulder of Highway 20, East of Montreal was a random act of kindness. I signaled, looked in my mirrors and pulled off the highway onto the shoulder of the road. Two hours earlier I had thrown suitcase number five, my camera case, and a bag of laundry onto the front seat of my Corsica. The backseat held two more suitcases, pots and pans, clothes, and an empty cat cage. Just two days after my fortieth birthday, I figured I had another eight hours to drive to my new job in Fredericton, New Brunswick, added to the six hours I had driven the day before. When the car came to a complete stop. I quickly shoved everything from the front seat into the back.

As the passenger's door opened I half expected a French accent as we were so close to Montreal. This hitchhiker was unlike anyone I had ever given a ride to. Here it was, a bright cloudless day on the road to nowhere and there standing along the highway was a man with only one leg and his crutches to balance himself while he thumbed for a ride. He was tall and thin and one would think a blast of wind from a passing transport truck would have blown him over. The first things to enter the car were his two crutches followed by one arm and a friendly "Hello," as he swung himself into the passenger's seat. When he sat down, I noticed that not only was his left leg missing, his left hip was missing too. Hopefully for his sake, his middle leg was still intact.

"Thanks, man . . ." he smiled from under his black baseball cap and pony-tailed hair. His oval face tapered into a goatee . . . "Thanks. I've been out here for over an hour an' no one stops to pick me up."

"No problem," I said after he closed the door and I checked my mirrors and signaled, speeding along the shoulder to match the speed of the traffic before pulling onto the pavement. "Where are you going?" I asked, rolling up the window to decrease the noise level.

"Headin' home to New Brunswick. I just moved here two weeks ago from Edmonton. Me and some buddies drove over to Cornwall to go drinkin' for a few days." He put his head back against the seat. I could tell he was thinking about something or just very tired.

"The name's Ryan," I said as the car moved into traffic and flowed along at twenty miles an hour over the speed limit. A few large rounded hills dotted the landscape on the right side of the highway. On the left, we followed the St. Lawrence River as it gradually widened the farther we traveled toward Quebec City until the turn-off for the Atlantic Provinces.

"Mike," he said, extending his right hand to shake mine in a firm grip. "You look like you are either movin' to or movin' away from some place?" He glanced in the back seat and then looked at me.

"Moving to." I said. Maybe in his mind there was a difference. "I still own a house in London, Ontario that I have rented out. I'm moving down east for a year with my job, so in a sense, I'm not really moving away." Maybe I was just running away, I thought. I had burdened myself with so much in the past two years that I couldn't finish anything properly. Strangely though, it had only taken three weeks after accepting this new job to tie up loose ends, finish all the small projects, renovate and rent the house, pack and leave. I now realize I could have done all that and kept my job, but there were other social and personal things I just couldn't deal with honestly, if I didn't take a break from them.

"Not me, man," he responded almost immediately with a sense of accomplishment. Mike looked out the side window, then continued, "I was so fed up with growing up and living in that nothing town of Edmonton. I took my last pay cheque, opened up a map of Canada, closed my eyes an' pointed my finger to a spot on the map and left."

"Where did you end up moving to?" I asked as he fumbled with his cigarette package. "I'll pull over in a while if you want to smoke outside the car," I said as we passed a transport truck climbing over a hill.

"Well, I don't know, I think it's just inside the border. It begins with an 'I' and ends with an 'N'. I was working in a bar there for the last while. We should be in New Brunswick in a few hours, maybe I'll recognize a sign or somethin' "

"You don't know where you live?" I asked, bewildered. The traffic lightened up and we were the

only vehicle on the highway for a long time. "Well, what's the name of the bar you work at and where are the guys that you drove down with?"

"No, I don't recall the name of the town. An' I don't know the name of the bar." He adjusted the crutches and leaned on his left elbow, staring forward into the Quebec countryside. He didn't seem too concerned, like he knew he would eventually find his way. I leaned forward and turned down the radio. It was just background noise anyway. We drove on in silence, except for the hum of the wheels, for almost an hour.

"There's a truck stop ahead, I'll pull in and you can have a smoke. I can feel the transmission slipping anyway and I should check out the fluids."

"Sounds like a plan," he said. "I was dozing off but I kept feeling something was pulling at my throat, musta been the nicotine. I worked as mechanic in Edmonton and I felt a bit of a pull in the engine. You're probably just low on transmission fluid. We'll be ok for a couple of hours."

Farther along the road I slowed the car, signaled and pulled onto the exit lane for the rest stop. When we got there, Mike pulled himself out of the seat, leaned against the car and lit up. I grabbed the map from the glove compartment located between the two front seats, got out and placed it on the roof of the car. It was quite windy under the light blue sky. I showed him all the towns along the routes but he didn't recognize any of them. He took so long that I was beginning to think that he couldn't read them either.

Mike finished his cigarette and got back into the car. I was around the front checking the various fluids. The oil and antifreeze were ok but the trans fluid was low. I closed the hood, got back in my seat and threw the map in the back and we drove off.

"I saw all three towns in New Brunswick that start with the letter 'I' and end with the letter 'N'. All of them are on the northeast part of the province. Near the city of Bathurst." Now there was a name I hadn't thought of in twenty years. One of my new projects was to find an old friend who lived there, that I had lost contact with when I was twenty-two. "Does that name sound familiar?" I asked.

"No, not really," he said, "me and my buddies drove for five hours and we went through Maine to get to Cornwall. Had to cross the border twice if I remember, in and out." His eyes squinted and he squeezed his lips together, "Well, they ain't my buddies anymore. Screw 'em!" he gesticulated, throwing 'the finger' at the clear blue sky and the Quebec City sign. "I told them when and where to pick me up and then they never showed. They must have gone back without me and my wallet with all my ID is still in their car. What am I gonna do when we get to the border?"

"There's no border between Quebec and New Brunswick." I said, "We're going around Maine, not through it." Mike sat there for the longest time, thinking about it all. I guess, unless he was still a bit hung over. I had a lot to think about as well. I knew where I was going and where I was coming from. The day I left, a close friend said "I hope you find what you are looking for." I hadn't thought I had given her, or anyone for that matter, the impression that I was looking for something I didn't have or that I needed. Was I projecting that image and not realizing it? She was the only one who thought I should stay. Everyone else thought it was a great opportunity to travel, see another part of the country and get paid three thousand dollars a month at the same time.

I hadn't planned on traveling alone either. After cleaning up around the house and storing most of my stuff in the garage I had painted primary red, canary yellow and blue last January, I spent a frustrating hour and a half trying to get my cat, Leviathan, into the car to put him in the cage. Twice I caught him and twice he scratched me and got loose before I could get him to the car. He must have sensed something was changing in his life and the house we lived in. He was not his usual docile eight-year-old self.

"I need another smoke," Mike said as we neared Riviere de Loop, where we would be making our turn and leaving Quebec. "I've been trying to think of the name of that town but I can't. I gotta take a piss, too." As the St. Lawrence widened to its greatest width and small islands began to appear in the middle of the river, we pulled off the road, under a bridge for a short break. Mike used the passengers' door as a shield against the wind and the traffic while he relieved himself and then had a smoke. Well, that shot down my

image of a double amputation!

Mike and I spent the next hour or so on the road in silence or listening to the radio (when we could get an English-speaking station), pointing out the change in scenery from Quebec to New Brunswick.

"You got a family, Ryan?" he said, adjusting his one leg and turning slightly to look at me as he spoke.

"A couple of brothers and a sister." I answered, turning down the radio again and rolling my window up against the continued noise of the wind.

"I'm the middle child of fifteen kids," he said, "all of us were born in late summer or early Fall. The last time I talked to any of them was about two years ago. I went over to shoot the shit with my younger sister and we got in a big fight after we went to the bar for a beer."

"Where's the rest of your family?"

"Oh God, they're all over Alberta and three older brothers in Toronto and Ottawa and another sister and her family in Woodstock. That's close to London, ain't it?"

"Yes, it's about thirty miles from London. I grew up there. Does anyone in your family know that you moved out here?"

"Nope," came his firm reply. The fields began to disappear and the tree growth became thicker as we traveled farther east.

"Did you bring anything with you when you came out to the town you can't remember?"

"Some clothes, a stereo and stuff I picked up along the way." We just drove past the 'Welcome To New Brunswick' sign and the nearest city was Edmundston. "There's the border," he said. "So let me get this straight," I said, looking in the mirrors and seeing no traffic in front or behind us. The vapor trail of an airplane above, cut across the sky headed East. "You came out here with next to nothing. You didn't tell anyone where you were going and you don't recall the name of the town you've been living in for the past two weeks? You managed to get a job but you don't know the name of it, either and these so-called friends have your wallet with all your ID, in their car?"

"Yep, and I don't care about the stuff in my room."

"Do you have any money in the bank or even a bank account for that matter?" I asked.

"Yea, actually, I get a disability cheque deposited at around 9pm tonight, at the Royal Bank."

"It's 4pm. We're almost at the next town. Why don't I drop you off there. You can go to the bank in the morning and the teller should be able to track down your account and the town you were living in. Or, maybe it's the hand of God reaching down and telling you to stop running away from the life you had and go home." Mike just looked over at me and nodded his head. He agreed that I should let him off in the next town.

Three quarters of an hour later I signaled for the second turnoff to Edmundston New Brunswick. We made our way to the center of town and I dropped him off in front of the Salvation Army Emergency Shelter. As he pulled himself out of the car and adjusted his shirt and crutches, I handed him a couple of twenty's which he refused out of some sense of pride, turned and headed across the sidewalk to the Shelter. I don't think he caught the similarity between his hometown and this one. I drove back onto the highway and in two hours I would pass through the city of Woodstock on the way to my new home.

## **SURPRISED BY JOY**

Brinda boarded the 3pm Boeing bound for Ireland, slightly exhausted from her two-hour car ride. Fortunately, the 401 hadn't been busy. There were the usual road hogs and slow pokes, transport trucks and long stretches of silence, broken by the sounds of Leonard Cohen emanating from the CD player. The weather had been in her favor this September day. The sky was blue and temperatures were in the high 60s (for those of you who haven't yet adjusted to Centigrade). The Fall Mums were blooming early at the bottom of the stairs as she left in the car for the trip. Her eldest son had bought the house for her from a small lottery win a few months previous. Inside her car was a lot of pot pourri, along with carved stones,



marbles and her miniature teddy bear ornaments scattered here and there.

Brinda parked her car at the large parking garage at the Toronto International Airport, picked up the small suitcase and took the Airport Bus to the terminal. Within a few minutes she walked through the security doors and emptied all the metal objects from her pockets into the green plastic container provided and placed her coat and bag on the security machine. She stood patiently as the security guard (who had a huge gap in his teeth, she noticed) scanned her with his metal detector. The gentleman in front of her had to go through the metal detector twice. The second time he had to take off his steel-toed construction boots which had set off the alarm. One of the guards placed her bag on his boots as they went through the x-ray scanner. It was not the cleanest thing she had seen and thought at least her jacket wasn't coming in contact with them. When the ordeal was over, she boarded the plane and looked for her seat. Row upon row of identical blue chairs with a darker triangle-shaped headrest stretched out before her. She had hoped for a window seat, but had to settle for the aisle seat across from the bathroom. She opened some pot pourri to give the air a more pleasant scent. Brinda stuffed her jacket and carry-on bag into the overhead compartment, closed the door and sat down by the window anyway.

"Thirty years" she said aloud to no one in particular. She had received a letter from an old friend she hadn't seen or heard from since she was twenty years old. Brinda pulled the letter out of her purse and read it again. She looked at the handwriting, probing the memories of her brain as she ran her fingers along the edge.

*"It's hard to believe that I've been in love with you for thirty years. Although, I've never written you a love song, never phoned in the last decade but once, only written twice. But I dream. You have been the main character in my stories, told late at night to typewriter keys. You will be nineteen, forever. When I was twenty-one and you were almost nineteen, I dreamt I swam the lake to your cabin, carried you naked to the beach, kissed your lips, caressed your skin and having never known love, I dreamt.*

*When I was twenty seven and you were still eighteen, I had a family of my own, but each and ever summer I would get away, and drive to the lake where your spirit walked the shoreline of my mind and having never known your love, I dreamt. Next summer, I'll be fifty-one and you will turn nineteen. I will leave a photo of myself on your dock at the beach and if you look closely, you will see me floating just beneath the surface unless I can be with you once again. Please come and see me while mid-life is still winking in our eyes."*

A lot had happened since those crazy days of our youth, she thought. It's a wonder any of those friends are alive, let alone able to remember each other after all these years. An airplane ticket had been enclosed in the letter and stipulated that she be with him in early September in Dublin Ireland. She would be met at the airport. The power of the World Wide Web was beyond her grasp, but her friend, Scott McRae, had found her with a search of her maiden name. Luckily she had kept her maiden name through all three of her marriages and subsequent divorces. Brinda wrote back and said she would come for the second week of September.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seat belts and place your chair in the upright position," broadcast the memorized speech from the stewardess. "Welcome to Flight 198 nonstop from Toronto to Dublin. We will be cruising at an altitude of 38,000 feet, and our travel time will be six hours and fifty-six minutes. In two hours we will be providing meals. After we reach cruising altitude you may order alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. At that time, your captain will turn off the fasten seatbelt light - and you may move freely about the aircraft."

"Thank God," she said to herself. That was what was missing from her trip. She neglected to stop at "Robin's" for a cup of tea on the way out of town and couldn't wait for the meal cart. The jet taxied down the runway and waited in line for its turn to cast off into the sky. The tarmac was as crowded as the highway going through Toronto. An airplane landed or took off from the airport every minute of the day. The low

rumble from the engines was initially irritating as the plane took off from the asphalt. There was a slow turn at the end of the runway and then a high speed taxi and liftoff that pushed one back into the seat. It settled quickly into a climb to 38,000 feet where it levelled off near the end of Lake Ontario.

What was she doing this for anyway? A phone call would normally suffice to bring two friends together, or letters sent by post. Her life was stable enough, teenagers at home and friends coming by to socialize on a weekly basis. She owned her own home with its normal wealth of bills, repairs, etc. She worked, acted, and taught at the local college. She was certainly busy enough. Why did she have to go across the ocean to see an old friend? Well, she was doing it and that was all that mattered right now. What was a week out of one's life anyway? She asked her girlfriend to look after the birds and water the plants that crowded the sunroom of her new house while she was gone.

She wanted to leave her car in the driveway and had asked her friend Tim to drive her to the airport but he said he would be out of town too. Tim. Well there was a friend, always with the flowers and the free tickets to the theater, dinners and other things. She had confided in him for years. She told him her troubles and fears as well as the good times and the excitements that made up her busy life. He recently expressed his love for her but she just wanted to be friends. He was quiet but wrote her notes of news and endearments every day. At 8:15 am sharp, the mail would birth itself through the mailbox opening and there would be a card lying on the hardwood floor. She was dating someone else but she and Tim would be best of friends no matter what.

The seatbelt light went off and Brinda unleashed the strap. She shifted her body in the seat and looked out the window at the land quickly passing from Ontario, across Quebec and turning East over the Atlantic Provinces where her grandparents had lived. From the air, she was impressed by the geography of the farmland flowing beneath the plane. The lack of it in some areas and the amount of it in others. The abundance of lakes amid the trees and the signs of small towns and villages. Long, long stretches of Trans Canada Highway ribboned across the green scape and into the distance. Wafts and clumps of clouds so close she wanted to reach out and touch them. So many lives down there on the good earth. Farm after farm and all the same, yet all different. A single car moves East along the highway empty of other vehicles and she wonders about the lonely traveller. Does he ever look up and see a plane in the sky?

The stewardess came down the aisle with the drink cart. She looked over at Brinda and smiled, "Hi, my name is Liz, would you like a glass of wine before we take orders for the meals?" The voice brought her back into the confines of the plane.

"Sure, Liz, that would be nice. I would appreciate a nice glass of wine right about now, as long as it's Canadian."

Brinda lowered the small table that was connected to the chair in front of her. Liz set the glass of wine on the tabletop and continued down the aisle serving customers. Twenty minutes later she returned to the back of the plane.

"I hope you don't mind if I sit here for a minute," she said, "I am off for two weeks vacation and even though I fly everywhere, I haven't been off the plane in months," Liz sighed and closed her eyes for a second. "I just need to rest for a minute."

"No, you go right ahead," Brinda replied, sipping slowly on the elixir of life. "Good wine in a plastic cup," she thought to herself. "Well it's free and it's cold." This young girl reminded Brinda of her own daughter in a few ways; out in the world, travelling alone, and probably hadn't phoned her mother in a long while. She let her rest and chose not to talk to her just now. Wine wove its way through her brain and her body, and with the humming of the engines at a much more pleasant resonance now, the deep blue ocean below calmed whatever fears she may have had about flying. Brinda pulled her journal out of her purse and by the time she looked over, Liz had gone. She saw her and two other stewards down the aisle taking food orders. Hunger set in and she waited for the cart and ate heartily when it was her turn to be served.

After the meal and a cup of hot lemon tea, Brinda settled back into the noisy consciousness of this trip. Voices mingling and the roar of the engine mixed with her anticipation, thoughts and emotions about

meeting her old friend. She had not felt this way in a long time. This space was of her own choosing. The last time she felt like this was at Christmas when she danced with her current companion. That was when they met. The air was clearer and the music sounded better, she had told him, after their first date. He watched her dance with her girlfriends for the first half hour or so before asking her to dance. They fell into a rhythm that had them wishing they had known each other for years. Over Christmas through well past Valentine's Day, he had showered her with the most wonderful poetry. Flowers poured forth from his brain.

Brinda stared out the window again. They were long past New Brunswick and well out over the Atlantic Ocean. Closer to Europe, she daydreamed into the deep blue, cloudless sky until she eventually saw Ireland from the sky. The jet began its descent into Irish airspace and the seatbelt sign came on. Liz resumed her position about halfway down the aisle and went through the landing procedures as the ground rose up to greet the wheels. The wing flaps went into their upright position as the air braking began and the plane touched down on the tarmac. The doors opened and the passengers proceeded to customs and then on to claim their baggage. The smell of the ocean crept across the land.

Brinda gathered up her belongings and retrieved her carry on luggage from the compartment above her seat. She said goodbye to Liz as she walked out the door and into the airport. Security was a little more complicated than in Toronto but within about 30 minutes she had her luggage and was headed for the lobby. When she stepped through to the passenger pickup area she stopped, stood up straight and dropped her luggage on the floor. She was not amused.

There stood Tim, wearing a big smile, his best suit and carrying a large bouquet of red roses and a ring box which he had just pulled out of his pocket. He had been on the front of the plane, rushed off first so he would be there when she got off to express his love for her. He had planned this romantic week to spend with the woman he loved. Tim had previously e-mailed a colleague working in Dublin to pose as Brinda's "old friend" inviting her to Ireland and sending him the money for the airline tickets, in hopes they would spend a wonderful week in Dublin.

Brinda was a smart woman, and as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. But right now she was livid. It took her less than a minute to figure out most of what was going on. Her 5'6" frame seemed to expand two or three inches and she was literally hissing at him. Hissss . . hissss . . missss . . miss, Miss? Liz stood over her.

"Miss, the plane has landed and we are unloading. Wake up Miss." Liz shook Brinda's shoulder and gave her a glass of water. "You slept through the landing. Are you OK?" Brinda looked around and gathered her senses, smiled up at Liz, drank the water and gave her back the glass. She began to put on her jacket.

"Yes, thanks. It must have been the altitude and the wine. I guess I was more tired than I thought. I had the strangest dream about coming here to see my friend," she said. She looked down at her journal where she had only written three words and the ink had run off the edge of the page. Brinda stood up, retrieved her bags and headed to the front of the plane. When she entered the airport she recognized Scott and was surprised by joy.

## **PLASTER ROCK**

Peter had been driving his Ford F-150 pick-up truck from Plaster Rock to Perth-Andover and was about thirteen miles from the Trans Canada Highway when he noticed the engine warning light. The tarp that covered the bed of the pick-up was starting to flap in the wind at the back where a yellow nylon cord had become undone. A bead of sweat appeared on his forehead as he began to wonder if anyone could peer inside as they passed him on the highway from a truck or a bus.

His hand came off the steering wheel, flicking a cigarette into the half-empty ashtray. He began looking for a place to pull off the road and check the engine. Peter had most of the tools that he needed in the silver tool box in the back of the truck. He could fix most anything. He wasn't too worried about the engine. It was an old truck. His heart was beating faster about other things that made up his twenty-six year old life. Mostly a life of taking dares and this was the boldest dare he had ever attempted.

The winding two lane highway passed by the dense forest of Spruce, Pine, and Aspen. Every two miles a rough-cut road emerged from the New Brunswick forest. These were the logging roads which gave the lumber companies access to their extensive land holdings. Smaller sawmills and dry kilns dotted the highway. Peter's pickup truck had left one of these roads about twenty minutes earlier, raising a cloud of September dust on the main highway as he shifted gears, glanced uneasily in the mirrors and sped along the highway.

The flapping of the tarp began to worry him as a second cord became undone.

When he took his eyes off the image in the rear-view mirror, he noticed a sign for a gas station up the road. He adjusted his baseball cap and lit another cigarette and crushed the first one on the dirty cab floor with his left foot. The place he pulled into appeared to have been vacant for a few years. The windows were boarded up and the gas pumps had been removed. The outline of the Irving name could be seen faintly against the building. The surface had been painted white and was modernized with a smattering of graffiti. Peter pulled the pick-up onto the far side of the building and tied the tarp tight. He then went around to the front and popped the hood.

The engine was low on oil and after he had poured in a couple of quarts of Quaker State, a hand reached out and touched him on the shoulder. Peter's heart stopped and his body went tense. His face turned white as a sheet. Instinctively defensive, Peter swung around and with a clenched fist, sucker punched the old man square in the forehead and sent him back against the wall. He slammed the hood shut and jumped in the front seat spitting stones against the old gas sign as he raced onto the highway. Looking back into the rear-view mirror, he saw no one on the highway behind him and there was no car parked at the gas station either. His heart wouldn't stop pounding.

This was one of the dares he had hoped would come along and he had pulled it off with little difficulty. The outcome outweighed the investment at least a hundred times. He had planned it for about three days. He was looking at the mirror on the left side of the truck as traffic passed in the other direction and he was looking for vehicles that were coming up behind him. The sun was low as it began the long path to set for the day but the light was not in his eyes yet. He went to reach for his sunglasses on the dash and a hand reached out and touched him on the arm.

"Why did you do that to me?" came the voice of the old man in the passenger's seat.

"Gezzus Christ!" screamed Peter, as he slammed on the brakes and came to a stop on the concrete bridge of the upper St. John River. His heart leapt into his throat and his fingers turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. The old man that Peter saw now was the same one from the gas station. He didn't believe in apparitions, and not sure he was seeing one now as the man bounced off the dash of the pickup. The vehicle came to a screeching halt. Ghosts or whatever, he thought quickly, wouldn't do that, would they?

Peter, in his dazed and paranoid frightened state, ran around to the other side of the truck. He opened the passenger door and threw the man over the bridge and into the river below. He stood there trying to catch his breath and calm his heart and nerves. He looked around to see if there were any cars on the road. There was one off in the distance. It was too far away to have seen anything that had happened a few

minutes ago. When he got back into the pickup and tried to start the engine, it flooded and thumped to a full stop.

By now he was really scared, both from the theft and the ghost, or whatever it was, that he began to run down the road. He got about a hundred feet from the bridge when he heard the voice of the old man calling his name. He turned and held his hands up in front of him as the old man walked in his direction along the side of the road. By this time Peter's hair had turned white from fright and he began walking backwards away from the apparition.

Ryan had been driving on the highway for about two hours after leaving Edmundston when he noticed a fleet of police cruisers along the highway and down one of the dirt roads he had seen, leading into the forest. Several miles further along a westbound Montreal/Ottawa Express bus swept by and then he noticed a blue pickup truck that had been parked on the bridge overlooking a river.

He looked back to see if anyone was around but didn't see anybody. Just as he turned his head to the front and looked up the road, there was a young man walking backwards and waving. "No more hitchhikers today, buddy, he said to himself as he waved back and kept on going in the direction of Woodstock and then on to Fredericton to start his new job. He figured a couple of more hours on the road and he should be there by 7:30pm.

## **KAREN**

### **part 1 Kelly**

The cool, blue sky air fought for space inside Karen's "Export A" lungs as she leaned against the wall, pulled the cigarette from her lips and headed downtown. The working world wouldn't see her for a couple of days. Granite wall, coal-black coat, amethyst sky, ruby red hair. The beauty of this scene is one that should be captured in a photograph and displayed on a wall at the Beaverbrook Gallery for all to see. Well, at least from an observer's point of view. Karen's green eyes saw this photograph, this moment in time, from a different perspective. From her eyes she saw the wind blow leaves and papers down the alley that lead away from the University Library, a shadowed alley that only shortened her walk downtown by a few minutes.

A weak smile came across her face as she thought about her Persian cat, Kafka, hanging halfway out the window of her apartment on Westmorland. He had lunged through the screen after a squirrel or bird or something this morning before she had left for work. Kafka was wedged in the hole he had created. It was his crying that had woken her up on this September day. She thought about leaving him there, dangling, but changed her mind.

Karen continued to walk down University to the center of town. Cars rushed by and strangers and acquaintances greeted her along the way. She picked up the things she needed for the costume party she was organizing for this evening. A small Atlantic Lottery win had tugged at her wild side. She walked the four blocks to Regent Street and was loaded down with potato chips from the Corner Store, balloons, black candles and streamers from the Dollar Discount, and more. The last things on her list of things to get were some beer and wine from the liquor store near Smythe and King.

The power of nicotine withdrawal grabbed at her nerves and luckily she was near her car. It was parked on the far side of the George Street Market parking lot. It had stalled yesterday so she left it there and had to walk home then and to work this morning. Karen threw what she had bought into the trunk of her red Saturn, pulled the cigarette pack out of her pocket and lit up. Eyes closed, she pulled the hot chemical-filled air into her lungs, oblivious to the noise of trucks, cranes and construction workers banging away on a new building in the distance. When she opened her eyes, the first thing she thought of was the last thing on her party shopping list, BOOZE!

The Beer Store was across town and seemed even farther now with her car out of commission. She pulled the cell phone out of her pocket and called her taxi driver friend Duncan to fix it for her. She reminded herself that she had to hurry. She still had to drop off all the stuff in her trunk at the space she rented at Gallery Connexion, go home and change into her Roller Girl costume and drive across town to pick up her best friend Sarah, and get to her party by 7pm.

Karen walked South on Regent and proceeded to cross Brunswick Street and pass in front of the bus station when she noticed a girlfriend sitting inside. She walked over to the door.

"Kelly, what are you doing here? Where are you going?" she asked as she entered the room and walked over to where her friend sat.

"Karen! I'm so sorry. I guess you didn't get my phone message," Kelly blurted out.

"Something happened to me that was beyond my control." The 23-year-old brunette paused . . . took Karen's hand in hers and puppy dog eyes filled with tears . . . "I found my Mother!" she finally said. "I was three year's old when she just got up one day and left us. My dad was devastated and all I had was a memory."

"Oh Kelly, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I guess the woman I thought was your mom all these years, must have been your step mom?"

"Yea," Kelly whispered, "but then I found her. It was so simple. Three weeks ago my boyfriend got a new computer and high speed Internet access." Her voice began to raise. She was smiling and back to her normal semi-annoying fast-speech self. "It was a new world to me. I must have been living in the attic all this time. I was surfing around using Google and discovered Four11.ca, the Internet telephone book. I typed in my Mom's maiden name and . . . Poof! . . . there it was! She's only hours away in Montreal and to top it

all off, she has e-mail. I wrote to her a couple of days ago and asked her to meet me tonight."

Usually, Kelly's nonstop yammering went in one ear and out the other but Karen's eyes were glued to her lips. Not even nicotine fits nor the party could pull her away from the never-ending story. Karen would hear more about it when her friend returned. The bus station was small, as was the town of Fredericton, and not too crowded. Everyone began to gather around the two girls and there wasn't a dry eye in the crowd when Kelly finished talking. She also told Karen that her brother would be the disc-jockey at the party tonight instead of her, just as the Montreal-Ottawa Express pulled into the station.

Karen gave Kelly a big hug and watched as her Oromocto High School friend boarded the bus, and headed up to the top of the hill at Prospect and onto the Trans Canada Highway towards Woodstock, Edmundston and then on to Montreal. Karen went by taxi to the beer store after the bus pulled away. The six-block walk along King and back would have been too exhausting with all the booze she had to buy. Returning to her red Saturn, she found her friend Duncan there and the car purring like a kitten. Karen gave him a big hug, pressing her breasts firmly against his stomach. Duncan hopped in the taxi she had arrived in and left. The time for his second job was coming up and he had to get cleaned up and changed for afternoon shift at the Post Office on Waggoners Lane. She drove east to pick up Sarah.

## **KAREN**

### **Part 2 Sarah**

The cat was curled up in a brown gray ball on the chesterfield moments after her owner's bruised body had left. The bruises made no impression on the couch. They were on the inside. Too many times in too many years the heat of the room had bothered her, preferring the comfort of the cold. The cat would argue that point. Sarah got up and walked slowly over to the blue-framed window, opened it to let in the September air. The 30-year-old, pale-skinned woman stared out the pane as the cat slept. The cold air poured over her torn fingernails and ring-free left hand to the floor and brushed against her legs.

The doorbell rang on the North Side bungalow as the evening wind swirled leaves around in the driveway. Moving away from the window, Sarah threw the blond shoulder-length wig over her black hair and sweater, glanced at the cat and opened the door.

"Well, it took ya long enough to come to the door!"

"Sorry," Sarah said, "I should have waited outside for you, but with this costume . . ."

"Come on," her friend said in a squeaky voice, roller skating around on the front porch in her 'Boogie Nights' costume, "We're gonna be late for my party. I bought all the goodies and just dropped them off at Gallery Connexion."

Sarah locked the door on her way out and didn't even look back to see if anyone noticed she was leaving. Her (in)significant other didn't seem to care what she did or where she went. This was just a false freedom. The furnace kicked in and warmed up the cat to a comfortable centigrade. The cat was too young to remember Fahrenheit.

Early fall had always been a good time for Sarah. A place to hide as a child when some of the bruises and scars were on the outside. The cold evening air around her was an early comfort that stayed with her into her thirties. This was the first party she had gone to in years, and her new job had forced her to come in contact with more than she could handle at his point in her life. Most of the time she did solitary things, her painting, stained glass, and her poetry. Sarah's newest and best friend at the University Library was ten years younger and full of 'piss & vinegar' with a nonstop social life.

"You look like a 5-foot Andy Warhol," Karen squeaked, rolling from the porch to the car.

"Get in or we'll be late." The red Saturn pulled out of Marysville and headed towards Union Street and then downtown across the Westmorland Street Bridge and the wide St. John River.

"How can you drive this car with the roller skates on?" Sarah questioned her friend as they drove down the darkening tree-lined streets. Karen swung her head from side to side. The waist-length wig slapped Sarah in the face. "Hey . . . you think I got big feet? I'm only five feet tall with the skates on! It's easy." Ten minutes later they arrived at the parking lot off Queens where the costume party was just starting. Before they got out of the car, three vampires, two cross-dressers, five devils, Elvis and a police officer walked into the building.

Sarah thought about the cat. She thought about the cool air coming in the window and how much nicer it would be than the noisy, hot dance hall. Karen smiled at the 'little Andy Warhol' and said, "Well, let's go inside and party!" Karen locked the Saturn and lit up a cigarette before going in.

They made their way across the parking lot and down the small incline to the front door. Karen skated to the bar, grabbed a beer and did circles around the dance floor in her bright green short-shorts, gyrating to the heavy metal music and the stares of 25 of her closest friends milling about and drinking. Sarah walked into the room and glanced over at the older man, dressed in the police uniform and was sitting alone in an area to her right. All her bruises disappeared.

## **KAREN**

### **Part 3 Allan**

"Ok, I'll be downstairs in twenty minutes," he said out loud to himself and maybe the cat. Buster sat on the



green tiles of the kitchen floor licking his paws and scratching a few fleas, not really listening to anything.

Allan rolled off the futon bed and planted his tired feet firmly on the blue carpet of his second-floor apartment. The September sun was creeping in the wedged-open window along with the cool morning air. It had been a few years since he had gotten up this early and certainly not to go and help an old friend with his new landscaping business. After a quick shower and a shave, he slipped his work clothes on over his six-foot frame and crammed his feet into the size 14 steel-toed boots. Allan had been helping Kevin Best clean up the grounds of several townhouse complexes and the contract ended today. He really enjoyed the gardening aspect of the work, but being a Ministry of Housing project for the unemployed, immigrants, and Wal-Mart shoppers, most of the work time was spent picking up the garbage with little time spent cutting grass.

Knock! Knock! Knock! on the door of his apartment had Allan lacing up his boots and heading down the stairs. Kevin was half way to his gray-dusty crew-cab when Allan locked the door behind him. If he had looked up as he walked away, he would have seen the cat scratching at the window, wanting out.

"There's your usual coffee." Kevin smiled his tight-lipped, bearded grin as they drove off.

"And I suppose you're still drinking warm milk, are you?" he said, after picking up the 'Tim's' cup and tapping the large, triple cream triple sugar cup of Kevin's. "Which one are we finishing up today?"

"Thought we'd clean up Copperthwaite Street. Sean and I finished off North Side Road over the past two days . . . oh, I bought two dump trucks yesterday and I need ya to help me with them this afternoon." Kevin turned the truck onto Main Street and headed West.

"Well, sure, buddy, but not too long. Don't forget I told you about this Halloween party I gotta go to at six or seven." The traffic was light for the so-called 'rush hour' as they turned onto Waggoners Lane and into the housing complex and then next door to the Post Office complex where his sister Rose worked.

"Yea, Ok. It won't be much work for a strong guy like you. I have a Newfie mechanic over there now pulling the two trucks apart so I can put the best of both on one truck. We'll be lifting the cabs off and exchanging them." Kevin said as he parked the truck, got out and grabbed the rakes from the back of the pick-up. "Garbage bags are behind the seat."

The morning went fast enough for the two men. They had worked together about six years earlier for a local property maintenance company where Allan was the foreman and Kevin was his crew Leader. After four years they had gone their separate ways. They kept in touch sporadically and now that Kevin had started his own landscaping company, he had wanted his old friend to work for him on a regular basis. Kevin was only a couple of inches over five feet tall and closer to the garbage. Allan spent most of the morning having to stop and stretch in between the stoop and bending to clean up the grounds.

Allan's mind was not on the job at hand but on this party that he was going to tonight. Even though he was tired, he would still be there. He had been spending a great deal of time in the York Library and the UNB Library doing a research project for his sister. He was in the library regularly and had made friends with a cute, little, redheaded librarian around his age named Karen. She had just won some money in the new Atlantic Lottery and was throwing a costume party for her friends and had slipped him an invitation note one day a couple of weeks ago. Karen was covered in freckles. He often wondered just how far down those freckles continued and he intended to find out! He was in using the computer to surf the Web when a familiar voice yelled out . . . "Last bag! Quitting time!"

Allan snapped his day-dreaming head back to see Kevin waving at him from across the complex. He headed for the truck and Allan followed behind him, a garbage bag over his shoulder and rake dragging along behind him. Thirty-one bags packed tightly into the back of the one-ton and they drove off to the town dump. Lifting the 300 pound cabs off and exchanging them was the easy part, but it had taken them the better part of the afternoon to unbolt every wire and bracket, housing and pin that held them together.

He arrived home exhausted, let the cat out, showered, shaved and changed into the costume he had rented for the evening, got in his car and left. He figured a couple of more minutes on the road and he should be there by 7:30pm.

## GIANTS OF THE NORTH WAR DREAM

"Ryan! Ryan!" Philip Acker's grade three legs ran as fast as they could carry him screaming his older brother's name, to the school yard where his twelve-year-old brother was taking his time going home at the end of a long hot day in grade six.

"Ryan! Come with me, I found somethin' in the attic at home!" He was jumping with excitement. "You gotta come home now, you gotta ..."

"Slow down, Phili" Ryan interrupted, "You're talkin' too fast. Whadja find?"

"It's a recorder, like the one dad gave you last Christmas, 'member, only bigger and lots of tapes all in a great big box and ..."

"Phili hold it, we've been up in the attic hundreds of times and never found anything, if you're lying to me I'll punch ..."

"No, No!, I'm telling the truth" Philip jumped back and put his hands up to protect his face.

The boys ran down Roywood Avenue to their semidetached house and up the stairs into the attic faster than you could say, `school's out for summer'! Moving aside an old blanket and a flag from on top of a khaki colored trunk, Ryan turned his head in amazement at his little brother.

"Holy Cow, Phili, how in the world did you get this old trunk open? It must have five locks on it! Wow!"

Philip puffed out his small chest in pride and said, "I was exploring up here and I found some old keys, I tried 'em and they fit so I opened it." He pushed the lid farther back so they could see everything.

"Do you know what will happen if Mom catches us up here with this? We'll get walloped like last week when we wrapped old man Dunford's cat in masking tape!"

"Yea, Ryan, maybe we should lock it back up and ..."

"No, no you ninny, we just have to be quiet and not get caught!"

"Oh?...Ohh!"

"Yea, Phili, so let's get it all set up, see if it works and see what's on these tapes but we'll really have to be quiet or we'll never see another..."

*"Beautiful day, January the fourth nineteen forty-four. I spent New Years with Phillips, Laywell, Warrington, as well as the nurses from the 168th Hospital. Phillips was drunk so we carried him back to camp and put him to bed, but on the way out he took the wrong hat and coat. He got the best deal and the nurses got us! January the second, it rained all day so we had classes inside the castle, the easy life of Wolf-Wolf is really getting me down."*

"What's a wolf-wolf, Ryan?"

"I don't know, just listen."

*"January the third, laid floors to extra huts and just found out one of my men burned down his tent by washing his clothes in gasoline, or petrol as they say over here in England, and then hung them over the stove to dry! Went to the hospital again with Laywell to pick up the nurses, my date slipped and I fell on top of her and put her in a hospital bed. Laywell did the same thing, only after he took her home!"*

"Hey, Phili, this little one is over, get me another one."

"Ok, here's one that says . uh ..Kor..Korea, that right Ryan, Korea?"

"Yea, I..."

"Boys? Boys? Are you upstairs?" Their mother's shrill voice scared the devil out of them. They put everything away and rushed quietly into Ryan's room.

"Boys, are you upstairs? Suppers ready, get down here right now and wash up, your fathers come home for supper early tonight."

Supper could not pass fast enough for them. They gulped down their meat loaf and potatoes but had to wait until everyone was finished before leaving. As they got up from the table, Philip broke the silence.

"Mom?" he said.

"What Philip?"

"Mom, were you ever a nurse?"

"No. Why?"

"O nuthin', just wondering. Me and Ryan are goin' upstairs to play, ok?"

"All right, but don't make too much noise, you two."

"Ok, Mom," they said as they raced up stairs and waited to make sure no one else came up behind them before entering the attic and putting on a new tape.

*"November twenty-seventh, nineteen fifty-two, Thanksgiving Day, here in AnYang, Korea. It's really a shame that you people out there listening to this tape can't see what's going on. None of you could possibly, regardless of what you have read or heard, understand the suffering of these people. To give you an example; if, in the U.S.A. it became a law that every man would be forced to bring his family to Korea for six months, to live as these people do and then return to the States, realizing that the first time he violated any law he would be sent back to Korea for life, the U.S.A. would be a utopia and none of us would do anything to make us be forced to return to this place because there's no place more like Hell than this Korean War."*

Ryan turned off that tape, rewound it and reached for one that was in the same group they were listening to earlier. This one wasn't that interesting to them. Their father, before he was their father, continued.

*"April sixteenth, I preached at church services today, twelfth chapter of Romans and the fifty first Psalm, that's an experience I'll never forget. Hardest job I've ever tackled. We had to go to Aulton Park yesterday for a parade, got our regimental colors and of course those luscious nurses were there. When we got back home, I finished the third chapter of my novel and went to bed. No one will ever remember us but O God do we ever remember we."*

"Hey I didn't know daddy wrote a book? Guess we'll hafta look for it later huh?"

"Will you stop talking, ok?"

"Ok. Ryan."

*"Extra troops came unexpectedly and everything went wrong. I had to borrow money for the party, so I left work at three and the party was at seven, Meyers picked up sixteen nurses, the land army found out and wanted to come, no soap, no music, no passes, can I do this, can I do that and a Million other things ... it's a good things we're behind Patton instead of in front of him! I managed to hook up electricity, stole a phonograph, my room was a coat room, no one danced, the English hated our food, beer, coke, candy, and kisses, lots of kisses, and everywhere whores and kneelers. I was too busy, no fun at all being in charge. April seventeenth, went to the Boars Inn in Knutsford. One girl there was worth the effort and while I tried to be nice to some police, some S.O.B. grabbed her and took off. I wanted to go back inside but there were too many whores so I went home."*

The two-inch tape finished and Ryan started to put everything away. "We'd better get going, Phili, it's getting late and I'm tired. Dad sure had lotsa fun in the war, eh Phili?" Philip thought to himself as they walked into their rooms 'If mommy wasn't a nurse then maybe she was one of them others, a whore, whatever that means'.

"Good night Ryan."

"Goodnight Phili."

The next few days went by quickly for Ryan and Philip because of the tapes, photographs and other memorabilia which were to be found in each exploration of the trunk. Some things were still puzzling them, such as the dice which kept coming up snake eyes on the dusty floor and several books about the war that

their father had written.

The thing that puzzled them the most was that on the tapes, which covered Europe, Korea and the Philippines from 1944 - 1952, their father was the loudest and most talkative man they had ever heard. Their father now, was quiet and basically peaceful, and it was their mother who was loud and could take two hours to tell you that she didn't like people who talked a lot!

Ryan's questions about the war itself were answered and discussed in his history class at school the rest of the week. On his way home on Friday all he could think about was the war, what his father did and what Mr. McKenzie had taught him in class. He shot old ladies, threw hand grenades at passing cars, bombed dogs and cats and just as they were about to capture him in the debris-filled streets he ran into the house an hour late.

"Where have you been?" His mother yelled, "Hurry and wash up and change those filthy clothes. Your father's home and it's supper time." Ryan tossed a grenade into the kitchen as he walked up the stairs to change and wash up before supper. Their German shepherd Eric, followed him up the stairs. The cat was sleeping on the piano.

"Hey Dad, where's Phil?"

"He's eating supper over at Nick's."

"Dad? Was Mom in the war in Europe?"

"No, she was still over here in North America at the time and we weren't married then," his father said as they walked into the dining room and sat down at their respective seats.

"When you were in the war, did you fight a lot, did you kill anyone? What was it like, and..."

"Ryan!" his mother butted in as she came out of the kitchen (untouched by the blast of the grenade, the cat was unhurt too), "Why do you want to know so much about your father and the war?"

"Oh..uh..well, we've been studying about it in history class this week and..."

"Well, that's enough talking at the table." She said.

"You listen to your mother now and eat, enough said." Supper finished just as Philip came in from next door and both boys went into the attic as they had been doing everyday this week. When they had opened the trunk Philip had an excited look on his face.

"Hey Ryan!"

"Yea whadja find, another tape? I thought we were finished."

"No, here's one wrapped in newspaper. What's it read?"

"Hey Philip, it's about D-day, you know, what I told you about yesterday after school."

"I bet it's really important, put it on!" demanded Philip, thumping his foot on the attic floor. Reeled and ready, Ryan turned on the machine and turned up the sound to hear it better.

*"May fourteenth, nineteen forty four, we took over three Welsh camps at Cardiff to prepare for seventeen thousand men of the Second Infantry to stay in and prepare for the coming invasion. I can't talk much about it, have to keep these to a minimum. May the twentieth, today while we were repairing the railway, we lost four men blown to bits by a mine. It was a great loss. However, we caught a female spy this evening and shaved all her hair off and painted her thighs with bright red paint and her breasts blue. June the third, for the past few weeks the men have been getting ready and impatient. At two a.m. the Third Infantry left and at four a.m. the Second Infantry left. June the fifth, I had to alert the mess cooks that they might be returning. They've been on board for two days, damn storm has upset plans, found a poem on the latrine wall by one of our invaders:*

*Time and footsteps pass us by,  
and in the darkness, a cry.  
Remember us,  
you who pass here by,*

*where we now lie.  
Say a soft serene prayer,  
remember us always,  
until like us,  
you are there.*

*June the sixth, D-day is here! A day late but she hit. Everything is going well. They don't give up too easily. Fate kept me from the fun of being in it so I issued ammunition and guns and we fired rounds towards Germany and..."*

"What's going on up here? I thought I heard noises!" demanded their father as he rushed into the attic and across the floor to the two frightened boys. "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"We were afraid you'd get angry, you're always busy and never talk to us and Mom's always yelling at us that you are always tired."

"Don't spank us!" Demanded Philip.

"I guess you're right. I really haven't been spending enough time with the both of you."

The boys began to put the tapes and things back into the trunk as their father stood staring at the flag of his patriotism, lost in a forgotten world. When they had finished cleaning up, he knelt beside them as they sat on the trunk.

"I know it's getting late, but tomorrow is Saturday and since you seem to be interested in the war and such, would you like to hear what really went on during that time? There's a lot more than those tapes and pictures tell" They sat there in the cluttered attic under the dim light, together for the first time since Ryan could remember, and the room was filled with one massive war dream.

## SUMMER OF '64

Their summers had been fairly normal ones. You know the usual, being shipped off to camp Pascobac in New Brunswick, riding bicycles around the neighbourhood, playing baseball at Maryvale Park or marbles, climbing trees and building forts. Let us digress on one point; when it came to building forts and club houses, they lived by the modified golden rule of 'Thou shalt not steal'. They added: just borrow it for a while and try and remember to return it later!

This summer would be different. Ryan Acker and his brother Philip were going to go with their parents all the way to Alabama in the United States to visit their grandparents. Ryan had passed grade six with high marks and was going to junior high in September at Riverdale High School and Philip was starting grade three and the best reason to go was that their mother was going to have a baby in December and only the family knew. It would be a real surprise to all their relatives. It was to Mrs. Acker!

This would be Ryan's second airplane trip. He was too young to really remember the first flight since he was only three and a half at the time his father retired from the army and they moved from the American air force base at Stephenville, Newfoundland to Toronto, Ontario in 1955. Capt. Acker had been stationed there after the Korean War to build part of the new Trans-Canada Highway for the Canadian government.

Every kid on the street wanted to go with them to this Alabama. It seemed so far away on the maps and no one could visualize fifteen hundred miles except that it was twelve thousand times around the school track someone had said, after doing some fast math on the sidewalk with a magic marker. Everyone wanted Ryan and Philip to bring back a piece of Alabama.

On the day of departure, everything was checked, packed and repacked when Philip put his pet frog in one of the suitcases, and the family dog and cat was put in a kennel. The trip to the airport was fun for the boys and the flight on the Trans Canada Airlines plane seemed one of the greatest things that could happen in their entire lives.

Seeing North America stretch out below them, high above the fruited plain, finding highways and small towns, hidden lakes and rivers. Watching mountains turn into hills and valleys, huge cities with roads going everywhere and nowhere. Their mother spent most of the four-hour trip telling the lady next to her what it was like when she flew Eastern as a stewardess and how on one of her flights they had the first triplets to fly etc., etc., etc., although the thought of having another baby kept her quiet at first!

When the plane landed in Atlanta, Georgia, they were all picked up by Uncle Otis and Aunt Fannie Lovelace, whom they had never met before and who mesmerized them with their southern drawl as they talked to Mr. and Mrs. Acker for the entire eighty mile trip from Atlanta to Lineville Alabama. It was on this short trip that an exciting piece of news hit Ryan's ears. Uncle Otis pulled up to a stop sign in Ashland, looked for traffic, and just before pulling ahead, said to his brother-in-law.

"Yor daddy an' momma sold theya orange grove in Florida last' week and have moved right next door ta our momma an' daddy," He said looking at Mrs. Acker this time.

Well, Ryan's eyes grew big as a Lowney's cherry and a smile came across his face so wide it could have touched his ears when he heard that both of his grandparents were now living next door to each other! The Acker's knew they were selling but were surprised that they had moved right next door. This news would save them a trip to Florida to see the Reverend, Ryan heard them say, and he wanted to swing on the palm trees his father told him about. But it was probably just as well since he had also told them that snakes lived in the flower beds as well as under the house!

Lineville, like most of the towns and villages in Clay County, grew older but never grew up. The population was two thousand, two hundred years ago, and it would be that two hundred years from now. The stores and businesses just kept getting passed down from generation to generation and seldom changed names. The sidewalks were still segregated and it had its colored town, with no name, on the outskirts.

The main street was only about thirty stores long on both sides from the post office past the city hall to the rail yard with its castle-like water tower. There were only about two or three times when the main

street was deserted; after seven o'clock except on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when the theatre was showing pictures and whenever the highschool had a football game. The whole town was deserted then and all the bleachers were filled for every game!

The football field was at the end of the street the Reverend Acker and the Lovelace's lived on, between the town graveyard, the highschool and Mr. Everett Lynn's house. Mr. Lynn owned the local grocery store, the Piggley Wiggley, and his twelve-year-old son, Mitchell, was the same age as Ryan. Mitchell had been the first to spot the Georgia car that evening, a boy about his age and his family, driving past him as he stood on the high school graveyard corner, then pull into the driveway of Mr. Cotney Lovelace, who let him spend many hot Saturday afternoons sipping coke at his International Harvester shop. Mitchell raced home and told everyone there about what he had just seen.

The first week was a blur to Ryan and Philip, sleeping every other night at each grandparents, visiting relatives, lots and lots of relatives, touring the countryside and spending a whole day at their parent's first farm. The driving everywhere was driving them crazy! And the southern cooking was too much to take. Philip nicknamed the first week "meals on wheels".

Saturday morning rolled by but Ryan refused to go anywhere, even outside the house. His parents left without him, going next door for breakfast at the Reverend Acker's house with Philip. The two houses weren't right next to each other. There were two vacant lots in between used as a vegetable garden for both families as well as small animal pens over at the Acker's. This would be a day of rest, or so he thought

Ryan stood on an old orange crate, blindfolded, hands tied behind his back, barefoot. The noonday sun beat down through the weather worn shed beside the "witch's house" and he could feel the stripes of heat on his body as he stood silent. He could hear the eight other boys in the room breathing. Eight boys who had earlier come over to his grandma's house to see who was visiting from Ontario. They had wanted him to come out and play with them on the other side of the street at an old dilapidated house in a pecan grove. Ryan was glad to see so many boys around his own age, even if they did talk funny! He stood in the heat, sweat pouring off his face. He heard two boys get up off of the floor and start hammering some nails into a piece of wood.

"Make sure the nails go in all the way," Said one of the older boys. It was Mitchell Lynn. He put his hand on Ryan's shoulder, Ryan stiffened. Mitchell moved around in front of him. "In order for you to be able to be our friend and play with us", He drawled, "you have to pass this one test, Ryan Acker!"

"What. What's that?" His knees were shaking like a leaf.

"Hus y'all", Mitchell said to the rest of the boys, he turned back to Ryan. "What you have to do is very simple, jus' jump over this board fulla nails we're layin' down in front of ya, an' ifn ya misses well..."

The two boys, Buddy and Jim (also known as Worm), finished hammering in the nails and placed it on the ground in front of the orange crate, nails up! Everyone grew quiet. Mitchell nodded his head and Buddy and Jimmy stood back. Fred, Jim's brother, and the Barton twins, Jon and John, untied his hands and feet. The last two boys, Scott and Claxton Runyan started thumping sticks on the dirt floor of the shed.

Ryan couldn't tell where they had put the board. They had lain it down so softly. Fred Medlock turned him around three times and everyone was chanting ..go..go..go.. in unison. Ryan took a deep breath of dusty air and closed his eyes, lifted his heels and sprang with all his might, throwing his arms and legs as far out in front of him as he could, for what seemed an eternity before landing in a bucket of fresh cow manure, which Mitchell had moved under his feet as he jumped. It was covered with plastic to hide the smell. Ryan took off the blindfold, smiled at what he saw, to the screams of laughter and various adjectives related to the smell emulating from the bucket and his legs!

## SQUEAKING NOISES

"Gramma, Gramma" Ryan screamed as he ran onto the old wooden dirty-white porch, slammed the screen door behind him and dashed into the large southern kitchen. "Gramma there's a girl out front and she won't speak to me," he panted, "she's waving her hands all over the place and making squeaking noises. What's wrong with her, Gramma?"

"Now don't worry yourself son. It's probably just Dinah from up the road," said Ryan's grandmother. She wiped her hands on the apron she wore on most mornings.

"But Gramma, what's wrong, why can't she say anything? Why is she throwing her hands all over for?" Ryan couldn't understand what was happening and he began to cry, burying his head in his grandmothers lap as she sat cutting Okra and splitting Yams for lunch. The screen door opened again and Dinah Scherette walked across the screened-in porch floor and through the living room of the Reverend Acker's home and into the kitchen just as bewildered and as perplexed as Ryan was. Mrs Acker raised his head from her lap and wiped the tears from Ryan's eyes with her blue flowered apron.

"Ryan," said his grandmother, pointing and the thirteen-year-old girl who had entered the room, "this is Dinah Scherette. She's one of the deaf children in your grandpa's church. She was talking to you with her hands because deaf people use sign language to talk."

"She's deaf? You mean she can't hear me talk to her?" This was something totally new to Ryan. He couldn't understand how this could happen to anyone especially someone his own age. "How do I talk to her?" He said trying not to look at the girl while he spoke to his grandmother. Mrs. Acker looked at Dinah and signed hello and told her what she and Ryan were talking about.

Ryan watched his grandmother's fingers and hands moving swiftly about her face and body and he watched the girl was do the same with her hands. They carried on like this for a few minutes until Dinah knew what was going on. She walked over to Ryan and in little audible nasal squeaks said "I Dinah," placing her flat and open palm on her chest and making the sign for the letter D. She then reached out and took Ryan's hand, flattened his fingers and placed it on his chest and then crossed his first and middle fingers forming the letter R and said "I Ryan."

"He fast learn," she signed to Mrs Acker, "I we go walk I tell him more," Dinah said with her fingers.

"Are you feeling better now, Ryan? Dinah says you are a fast learner and she wants you to go outside to play and she will teach you to speak her language. If you are going to be here for the rest of the summer, you might as well learn to talk to all your neighbours."

"Yes gramma, I'm better now," he said, "tell her I'll go outside with her."

"Well now, honey-child, why don't you tell her yourself."

Ryan did what his grandmother told him. He hooked his two index fingers together and then interchanged them, pointed at Dinah, himself and the side door then cupped his hands towards his face and lowered them to chest height and then put his palm on his chest making a small circle to say "friends you and I go outside now, please." He was learning fast. It seemed to come easy to him and Dinah gave him a smile he would probably remember for the rest of his life. Well at least for the rest of the summer.

Ryan and Dinah went outside into the Lineville Alabama sunshine and headed for the highschool down the street about two blocks and sat on the swings. Ryan found out that she could read lips and even though she couldn't hear it, her speaking voice was quite understandable. Dinah handed him a folded up piece of paper on which were the alphabet symbols for sign language. He sat for about ten minutes going over the signs and had them memorized in no time at all. Dinah tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

"It easy all signs are what you see all day," she spoke and signed at the same time. "What this?" She put her index finger on her other wrist.

"Watch," said Ryan.

"No. Time dummy," she put her index finger to her head and circled it around, laughing. "What



this?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Love."

"Right." Dinah gave the sign for OK which everyone uses.

"What this?" She put her fingers in her mouth and then cupped them and brought them up to her lips then put her cupped hand under her chin and dropped it to her stomach. Ryan had to think about this one. All the signs were simple except the last one, and then it seemed so logical.

"Food, glass of water, throat to stomach. Food and drink, hunger."

"That Ok," said Dinah, "say in a sentence."

"Let's eat. I'm hungry?"

"Right," she said, and pushed Ryan off of the swing, signing to him to follow her. They ran down the dusty road all the way into town and stopped at the drug store. Dinah had arrived a few minutes before Ryan did and had already ordered a burger, fries and a coke for both of them. She looked at him, huffing and puffing as he came in the door and sat beside her on a stool. He shook his head and took out his wallet to show her he didn't have any money. "That Ok," she signed and pointed to the man behind the counter serving customers, "man he my father no pay money."

They sat and ate their burgers and drank their cokes and then headed back to his grandfather's house for lunch. Ryan felt that he had learned more in the hour he had spent with his new friend than he had since the beginning of the summer. A whole new world had been opened up to him and he was going to make the most of it starting right now. As they headed up the street to the house, Ryan did something he thought he would never do, he slid his hand into her hand and smiled a smile that needs no sign language.

## KICK THE CAN

Summers in any Alabama town were not worth talking about as far as most of the older citizens were concerned. Why, any kid walking down the streets of such well known towns as Weedowee, Ashland or Wadley could tell you that everyone and I do mean everyone, even the dawgs, was sittin' in de shade or sippin' on a coke.

Lineville, named after the county line, not the railway line, was no different. Most of the women folk stayed at home and most of the older men sat in the shade at Mr. Lovelace's International Harvester shop until the sun started to shine on them and then they would all move across the street to Joe Pollack's garage and sit in the shade until the sun set. With the kids of the town it was a different story. They didn't seem to be bothered by the daily heat and could be found down at the new city swimming pool. The younger ones went swimming and the older boys went looking at the 'southern belles'. The only drawback to this was, if you had eyes on someone's special girl, you could find your shoes and pants in a bucket filled with a mixture of Coca-Cola and chlorine! That concoction was enough to make Swiss cheese out of anything.

Afternoons were the longest and the coolest part of the day. The Barton twins, Jon and John, took Philip Acker under their wings since they weren't much older than he was. They stayed over at the Bartons or up the street at the Reverend Acker's most of each day. The rest of the group of eight plus Ryan stayed together and the south side of Lineville would never be the same for the last week of his vacation. Two days earlier, after church or 'Sunday go ta meeting' time, Mitchell Lynn, Buddy Riley, Fred and 'Worm' caught and killed a six-foot snake in the graveyard, tied a fishing line around its head and every time a car went by they would pull the snake across the road. Most folks going home from church didn't notice it but Mrs Moss, who ran over it did. She came to a screeching stop, backed over the snake and ran over it again. She did this three or four times until she thought it was dead. When 'Worm' pulled the head of the snake, which was all that was left, across the street, the lady gave a scream you could hear all the way to Talladega, turned the car around and hit it again before it could be pulled to the other side!

The other boys, Ryan, Philip and their cousins, Scott and Claxton Runyan and the twins were over at Reverend Acker's that Sunday, running around the screened-in sun porch and all throughout the house chasing some bats that must have come down from the third floor attic. The Runyans had come over for Sunday lunch and in the south when you come for lunch you usually stay all day. It could also have been because Mrs. Acker made the best pecan pie, carrot cake and iced tea in the whole county!

One day later (Monday, for those people who don't think of summer as one long weekend) after the usual trek to the swimming pool. All ten boys went over to Fred and Jim Medlock's house for a game of kick the can. This is a game where an empty can is placed in an appropriate spot, usually the front of the house, one person is 'it' and the rest hide around the outside of the house. The 'it' person has to find you and run back around to the front of the house and kick the can before you do. If he does, then you have to help catch the others and if he doesn't, then you get to hide again.

The game went on until late in the evening and two things happened before they were all called next door to the Lovelace's for ice tea and watermelon. It was the last game and Fred was 'it'. Fred was also barefoot and someone, (they didn't find out who until years later) had filled the can with water before Fred came around the corner and kicked it, breaking his big dirty toe! The other thing that happened was not quite as painful. Ryan had hidden in the back of an old pickup truck at the end of the yard to hide in and an unfamiliar kid, jumped over the side of the truck and landed right beside him. The only pain was in his heart, again.

"Hi ya'll", she said, "I'm Fred's sista, Anne. Welcome to Lineville!"

Well, the game was over because of the water in the can and all the children were sitting around Granny Lovelace's living room gulping down iced tea and eating watermelon when Mr. Acker walked in from the side porch and joined them. Coming home after all these years was the adrenalin that he needed to make him feel young again. When he had been told about Fred's toe hitting the can of water, he roared with laughter!

"I guess you're not so lucky?" He said finally.

"No suh", said the fifteen-year-old, "at least it's not broken off."

"I've had similar predicaments but I guess I've been lucky all my life", said Mr. Acker. "When I was younger, I was lucky to be alive! Why, my Ma and Pa started worrying about me getting killed when I was three years old. Pa bought me a tricycle then and I made a race track out of our front porch. The porch went around the house on three sides and one day I went around the corner too fast and ran right over the edge and broke my leg!

"Ah bet it hurt mor'n my foot!" laughed Fred.

"Just a scotia bit more but I'm not finished yet. Pa was always getting me something to ride or play on that Ma didn't like. She said he was goin'ta get me killed. Course Pa didn't pay too much attention to her and went right ahead and got me most of the things he wanted too. When I was Philip's age, about six or seven, he got me one of them little bicycles like some of you boys have. Then the neighbours said I was goin' to kill myself. Once I even tried to jump a pig that ran across the road in front of me and I broke two ribs doin' that!" He sucked on his cigarette and coughed.

"Didn't you have any brothers or sisters Mr. Acker?" One of the boys asked.

"No, I was born weighing fourteen pounds and Pa said that was equal to two kids! Now, as I was saying, Ma gave the bike away and when I was eight. Pa bought me a five gait horse. I rode him to school every day and by the time I reached home in the evening all the old sisters along the road had called home to tell Ma I had passed their house like a flying devil!"

"I accidentally got even with the woman who caused me the most trouble. Dan was the horse's name and he must have known how much trouble she was causing me because he had a hairline crack in his right rear hoof and as I ran him past her house, which was about one hundred feet from the road, he chose that exact moment to lose the lower part of that hoof. It sailed right over her head as she sat on the front porch and went through one of her plate glass windows. I didn't think I would like to see my next birthday, which by the way was on Valentine's Day. I've always been a real sweetheart!"

When the laughter died down, Mrs. Acker gathered up all the plates and everyone went outside and said good night to each other. Most lived on the same street as the Acker's and Lovelace's but Mitchell and Buddy had the farthest to go. They waved goodbye as they crossed at the end of the street and faded into the shadows of the graveyard.

## PEPER'S COVE

The twenty-four foot converted tuna dory ploughed through rows of four foot waves, which lashed against its keel and rolled the boat close to the ominous cliffs. Strong salt sea winds pelted the four men as they hung on to the small vessel which had just left the Newfoundland harbour of St. John's.

The engine, pushed to its utmost, heaved the boat around the jagged cliffs and went into a small rock-filled cove. Four faces relaxed, four tense bodies rested and the big black Labrador stuck his head out of the cabin. The water was calm, the boat was calm and the air in the cove was calm ...

"My son, by geez! De engine, she stops!" yelled the freckle-faced Newfie at the wheel. The Lab sank back into the cabin and the door slammed shut. "Drop the anchor, Ryan," screamed the captain, "we're driftin' towards the rocks! Ivan, see if yee kin start the ol' diesel and hurry my son!"

Ivan jumped down beside the engine. The dog was sick on the rug. The captain grabbed the slippery wheel. Kevin ran to the bow and heaved the anchor into the sea.

"Lard tunderin' geezuz, bye," bellowed the captain, as he saw Kevin and Ryan heave the anchor, "yee fergot to tie dee anchor, der's no rope to it!"

Ryan took an oar in his hands and yelled, "We're heading for the rocks! Get that engine going!" Chug .. sputter ... Chug .. achug .. sputter .. chuga .. chuga ... the engine started and lurched forward, throwing the four men over the side and into the briny deep. They scrambled to shore in time to see the boat heading towards the wooden pier, with the big black Lab grinning over the stern, only to be flipped head over tail into the water as the dory hit the dock! Families and friends were already out on the side of the cove with blankets and Screech to warm them up and the Lab had to be hauled out with a fishing net.

"That give me some fright eh, Ryan?"

The question went right by him. He was too cold and wet to talk. He was just thankful he'd made it through the day, this being his last in St. John's Newfoundland before setting out for the west coast of the island and then off to visit his brother, Philip, in Key West, Florida.

He had been lucky getting a ride all the way from Toronto to St. John's with one truck driver, but somehow having to listen to the same two tapes of Hank Snow and Johnny Cash for the whole trip was too much to bear. It was enough to turn a cowboy off Country and Western music forever!

Ryan called his brother on the phone to let him know he was on his way. He loaded up his pack and said goodbye to everyone as he headed off to the bus station. When he boarded the bus to Corner Brook, it was full and he had to stand for five hours until the first passengers were let off at Deer Lake.

Upon his arrival in the town of Stephenville, he found out that his plane was early and was leaving one half hour after he had arrived and he was unable to visit the town where his father was stationed with the military in the early '50's.

## LISA

The news of the tornado broke through the air like a shotgun blast as the small group of men sat fumbling with their coffee cups at a roadside stand in Orlando, Florida, after visiting Walt Disney World. Hurricane news was fairly ordinary but tornadoes were usually confined to places farther inland. This one was clearly different. The radio said that it had destroyed an entire house-trailer community and Philip Acker's home was in one of them. They couldn't get back fast enough!

Ryan, Philip and two of his friends from Eagle Mountain, Tennessee, jumped into Philip's camper van and headed for the Keys. Philip had left home following a series of heated arguments with his parents, about the three-foot length of his hair, smoking, and a myriad of other things which seemed trivial to him at the time because he looked the same as all of his friends. Actually, his parents had lost their tolerance and kicked him out. Philip had moved from Toronto to Florida just over a year ago and seemed to be doing quite well in the construction industry. Ryan was in college and hadn't had a chance to talk to his brother until this trip during summer holidays.

The five-hundred-mile drive from Orlando to the Keys did not take as long as the trip coming up; the news, however, was not as fast. The radio kept giving damage and death reports but would never say which trailer park had been hit.

It was nighttime when they arrived at Deni Key and drove into the park. The tornado had jumped over the trailers in their neighbourhood and totally demolished the adjacent one. Over there, not even a streetlight was left standing and boats from the marina were strewn everywhere. When they got out of the big van, they could see people on the other side of the canal which separated the two parks, walking around in shock. Nothing had moved on their side of the canal, not even the shells and starfish drying on the table in the back yard! Ryan even found a letter to him, from Jamaica, leaning against the mail box, completely undisturbed. Ryan, Philip and his two 'hippie' friends unloaded the van, a converted milk truck, and went into the trailer to rest from the trip.

The next morning they were all up early and walked over to the wreckage to help with the clean up. By the end of the week, most of the important work had been accomplished. Lights and water were restored, temporary shelters had been built and food and clothing were pouring in from the main town, Key West. Most of the looters had been arrested or shot by the police.

"I have to leave tomorrow afternoon for Jamaica, Phil. I wrote to a friend from college who lives there and told him that I'd be coming to visit you and he sent me a return ticket last week and to go and visit him. He also threatened my life if I didn't pay back the sixty dollars when school starts in September!"

"Well man, it's been really super having' ya down hea in the deep south", Philip said with his adopted drawl. He lit up and slid back into the wicker chair. "It's been a real gas rappin' with ya, Ry. I'll give ya a lift in the mornin'."

"Uh...thanks, Phil." Philip drifted off and Ryan got up and went for a walk to get some fresh air. His brother had really changed over the past couple of years, he thought, He had become someone to be with but not really to talk to. He seemed to be merely passing through life. 'We were together but not really close and it really hurts not to be that way', Ryan said to himself as he sat on the dock. The ten summers he and his brother had spent in Alabama passed through his mind. As everyone grew older they had simply drifted apart. Mitchell and Buddy went off to law school; Mr. Medlock died and Fred and 'Worm' took over the hardware store; Dinah got married. It just wasn't the same going home anymore. His thoughts and dreams passed into sleep. John and Glenn found Ryan on their way home from town, asleep on the edge of the dock, and took him home. At noon the next day, the Piper Indian took off from Key West Airport for Kingston, Jamaica.

The airport was not crowded and only ten people were going on the fifteen seat Indian. 'No wonder it was so cheap', Ryan said to himself as he waved goodbye to his brother, boarded the plane and buckled in. The weather was beautiful and the plane took off with no problems. The land and people grew smaller and the deep blue sky got bigger as Ryan drifted off into sleep, lulled by the engine's rhythmic purr. He was

awakened abruptly when a hand moved across his waist and undid his seat belt. "We've been in the air for half an hour. I'm Lisa. I'm sorry I woke you, and I hate seat belts." She extended a slender hand. He took it in his. He was wide awake now.

"Thanks," he managed. "I'm Ryan. I didn't realize I was so tired. Where are you going?" he asked. She was still holding his hand.

"I'm visiting an aunt and uncle in the Beverly Hills section of Kingston for a few weeks." She smiled a long smile, released his hand and leaned towards him, "What about you?"

"I'm visiting a friend from college whose parents live in Ocho Rios on the north coast...You're very pretty, Lisa, and I like your dress. It really suits you", he said after a long pause. Impulsively he took her hand back and kissed it, she blushed.

"Where do you go to college, Ryan? You don't sound like an American." Lisa said.

"In St. Catharines, up in Ontario. I'm from Toronto, but ..."

"I'm from Toronto too!" she said excitedly. "Isn't that a hoot?!" He smiled.

"It's a small world. Welcome to Jamaica," she said. Ryan put his arm around her and their lips met. The plane landed. They walked across the tarmac arm-in-arm. "Do you have any place to stay, Ryan?"

He opened the terminal door for her. "No, I don't. I was going to go all the way to Ocho Rios, until I met you". He squeezed her shoulder gently.

"Well, I can't exactly ask my aunt and uncle to let you stay over at their place. They don't know you at all".

"I've got a way around that," he said as they picked out their luggage from the racks. "They'll know I'm half way all right or you wouldn't be getting off the plane with me and since we're both from Toronto they might think we know each other already, right?"

"Right!"

Lisa's Uncle Bill and Aunt Anne met them at the Custom's desk and they all walked out to the car, at the front of the airport lounge.

"Do you know any youth hostel or hotel I could stay at for the night, before I hitchhike up to the north coast?"

"No, no, my boy. Wouldn't hear of it? Especially from a fellow Canadian!" Her Uncle Bill threw Ryan's pack and Lisa's suitcase in the trunk of the car. "You can stay with us for a few days and phone your friend to tell him you're here, if that's all right with Lisa, of course."

"That's just fine with me" she smiled at Ryan and took his hand in hers. "That's just fine". Her uncle drove home. The next day woke him with the bite of a mosquito, which had buzzed into room and under his sheets. Pulling the covers aside, Ryan crawled out of the bed and stood before the open screened window overlooking the tropical hills of Kingston. It was really different seeing giant palm trees instead of pine trees. He closed the bamboo shades on his nakedness as the key hole shower in the next room was turned off. He put on his blue-jean cut-offs and his Kino sandals and walked down the hallway to admire the mountaintop view of the harbour from the living room.

"We all talked so late last night I thought you would sleep all day". Lisa's afternoon voice made Ryan turn his gaze from one spectacular view to another. Lisa had just stepped out of the shower and into a well-filled baby blue bikini before Ryan came in. "My aunt and uncle asked me to show you around when you woke up. I'm afraid it's a bit too late for that now but I've fixed something to eat if you're hungry". It was his eyes that were hungry. Ryan walked over to the adjoining kitchen and sat down at the glass table.

"How could anything get cold in this weather?" he laughed. "Breakfast at four in the afternoon is not exactly 'early to bed and early to rise' but vacation is vacation!"

"When you're finished, come on up to the roof and catch the sunset. I want to work on my tan before the sun goes down anyway," she said and grabbed a blanket.

Ryan finished as quickly as he could and walked up the stairs to the fourth floor roof garden to join her. The sun bathed them in its warming light until it could stay above the ocean no longer. As it went down,

they walked to the edge of the roof to watch its red glow. He held her in his arms.

"I have to leave tomorrow. I'll call you in Toronto in a few weeks," he said softly and kissed her.

"Do you have to leave so soon?" she ran her hands down his bronzed back. "I want you to stay." She pulled the string to her swim suit and it fell to the ground as she pressed her full body against his. The sun set into the harbor, the moon rose silently over the mountains and the wind cried while they lay under the stars capturing their sighs and silence.

## **VISSEN OP DE BRUG**

Someone stood at the front door of the house where I was staying the summer of 1971 while working in Holland. Without my glasses at eleven thirty at night it was hard to see who it was by the top of his head from my third floor attic bedroom window. The voice was in a whisper and I could not make out if it was in Dutch or English. I leaned out the window to look directly down at the front door and saw that there were two people, Mr Vroogtman and another man.

The landlord pointed up to my room. All I could see of him while he was in the doorway were his arms and he pointed to his wristwatch. He extended his hand to the other man at the doorstep to say goodbye and he took a white envelope from the other man who then walked into the unfamiliar European night.

I was kneeling at the window, resting my arms on the sill, when I heard the door slam shut. The quiet night was ruptured by the sound of its closing. The man looked up from beneath the streetlight. I could see clearly then, the name of a community college in St. Catharines, Ontario on his dark-green leather jacket and realized immediately it was Peter Kurbogevic that had come calling so far away from home. He was still looking up at my window so I raised my hand and said loudly "Peter, have you got somewhere to stay? I'll be right down." He raised his hand in the air and said everything was all right and he would see me the next day. He turned and walked off into the short summer night.

I was up and dressed at six o'clock in the morning and bicycled the five miles to the warehouse of VanSchooten en Sonen, bulb distributors in the town of Linnaeushoff. I had gotten the job only by chance when I went home one weekend to Toronto at the end of my second year at college. The bulb salesman, who now owns the company, was visiting the local garden center where I was working and offered me the job. I just happened to be standing near him while he was talking to the manager of the place about renewing his order for the following year and said I would be interested in working for him. The job paid the equivalent of about one dollar an hour Canadian but how many chances does one get to work in Europe? The work at the warehouse was mostly menial counting, cleaning, sorting, storing and shipping some of the two million or more tulips, crocuses, hyacinth and other bulbs that the VanSchooten Company export to North America each year.

Only a few of the twenty-six people employed there could speak English, so it was hard at first understanding what they were saying. Because most of the orders were the same, I could understand many of the Dutch words quite well after the first week. At first I learned to swear fluently in Dutch before learning the proper language.

The hard work paid off in one respect. I had lost almost thirty pounds since starting work here a month ago. Bicycling back and forth the ten miles every day helped too. I noticed during my stay that the dependence on bicycles in Holland was more than astounding. There were more of them than cars! Separate smaller roads for bicycles ran beside each main highway plus a separate road for pedestrians. No bikes or mopeds were allowed on the highway or on the pedestrian walkway and everything ran smoothly.

This was the last day for this work week. We were let out at noon on Fridays because we worked ten-hour days during the rest of the week. My mind had not been working too hard since my friend had come to my house the previous night. My landlord handed me an envelope this morning at breakfast and told me that a friend of mine had come to visit but that was all I knew and I hadn't even opened the envelope yet.

When the whistle blew at noon, we all lined up at the pay desk and picked up our money which was

paid in cash on a weekly basis. I had planned to go camping with two of my co-workers, Leni and her twin brother Jim. When I told them my friend Peter was here, they said they would go on without me.

I picked up my pay, jumped on my bike, kissed Leni goodbye and headed for the town of Hillegom. I rode about three quarters of the way before I saw him. He was walking towards me in the bicycle path! I could see people on mopeds and on bikes shaking their fists at him and he was shooting the finger back at them. He must have gone back to the house and been sent hoofing all the way to Linnaeishoff!

The closer I got, the worse he looked. The last time I had ever seen Peter look so messy was at the Warwick Hotel on Jarvis Street in Toronto when a stripper poured a beer over his head for pulling her negligee off after she had finished a dance and was walking past our table. He was facing away from me yelling something in Polish at a Dutchman who was yelling back at him. I rode up to him and screamed some vile name at him in my new language, and with a slap on the back knocked him to the ground. He jumped up ready to kill whoever had done this foul deed.

"You stupid dike-hopper!" he screamed, "I'll, what the..Hello..Ryan!?" Peter Kurbogevic stopped short of dropping his best friend with one blow. "What the Hell did you do that for? I've just about had it up to here with these cheese heads and their damn bikes! Don't they know where they're goin'?"

"I didn't mean to knock you over", I said as I helped him brush the dust off his leather jacket. "This is a separate roadway - the pedestrian walkway is up there," I said, pointing to the narrow strip of asphalt running beside the graveyard fence. "Let's get up there and walk back to the house before we get run over. You were already a mess before I knocked you down. What happened?"

"Well, after I left last night I thought I had a place to stay but I couldn't get in so I went over to what I thought was a small park and went to sleep. It ended up being the levee around a canal. I woke up early when some son-of-a-bitch wino tried to push me into the water. I guess he tried to roll me and didn't find a thing on me. It was when I reached for my jacket that I slipped and fell into the canal. Man. They really stink!"

"Where did you put all your money?" I asked as we crossed the highway and headed up to my street to the house.

"I may be Polish but I'm not as dumb as that wino thought I was! Where's the envelope I gave your landlord last night? I put everything in there before I even got to your place".

"It's still up in my room," I said "I haven't even opened it yet. When we get to my house I want you to go upstairs and get cleaned up. I've got some clothes that might fit you".

"Thanks Ry' but I've got stuff in my pack. Your landlord took it for me. It's already up in your room. I dropped by an hour ago when I went back to your place and talked to the people you're staying with. I had an easier time getting out of Soviet Poland than I have had trying to find you and get some peace and quiet around here!"

We finally reached the house and Peter went upstairs to take a bath and change while I helped my landlady, Mrs. Vroogtman, get some lunch ready. She was the aunt of the salesman who got me the job and she gave me the room rent free just to have someone around when her husband worked the occasional night shift. They had no children. Peter was taking a long time in the bath so I went upstairs to see what was keeping him.

I could hear mumbling and grumbling and a few words in Polish that were not in the dictionary so I opened the bathroom door and when I looked in I saw him in the tub, holding onto his left leg trying to pull his big toe out of the faucet! "How in the world did you do that?"

"I was resting in the water and then my head slipped under and my legs shot up and ... well don't just stand there laughing, help me out dammit!"

I reached over and turned on the tap, the water pressure blew his toe out. I turned to leave. When I opened the door and looked back to tell him that lunch was ready he was hopping around like a wounded rabbit. "You want me to kiss it and make it feel better?" I said in an unsympathetic tone. The bar of soap he threw at me missed. I closed the door and went downstairs to wash up in the other bathroom. "We're leaving



on the next train to Amsterdam so hurry up." I yelled up the stairs. Peter came down in a few minutes and we left right after a lunch of soup and cheese.

The trains in Holland are all electric. No noise, no pollution and the fares are not too bad either. The distance from Hillegom to Amsterdam is only about twenty-one kilometres with one stop at the town of Haarlem (where Jim and Leni and I spend most of our weekends bar-hopping). Peter and I, at least, didn't look like tourists. Tourists usually stand out in a crowd. Americans in Bermuda shorts were the loudest dressed and most talkative of all the visitors to Europe. They, like the Japanese tourists, were loaded down with cameras and binoculars.

Peter and I didn't talk too much on the train, for we were too busy watching the tourists trying to talk Dutch to the natives. You could always tell a tourist on his first trip because he would always be sitting or standing right out in the open counting his money or sharing it with members of his family, a very unwise thing to do in a crowded train or anywhere for that matter. We decided to go and get something to drink after getting off the train.

Directly in front of the station sat an enormous fountain which was the hub of life for hundreds of young people who just mill about or sit on the numerous steps and play music and sing songs and recite poetry. The sight of the fountain and the sweet aroma of marijuana smoke in the air attracted people by the hundreds. Across from the fountain on the east side of the canal stands the Kabul, a derelict warehouse full of beds available to the weary traveller for pennies a night. Peter and I crossed the bridge that led to the Kabul and found a sidewalk café on an uncrowded side street a few blocks away. It was an older part of the city, with narrow streets of cobblestone and two-storey houses with large bay windows.

"Four Heineken," Peter told the waitress as we sat down at the table nearest the street. A small white metal fence ran along beside the outer tables. "How was your trip over? I wrote your mom and dad and they told me where you were staying."

"Well Peter, you left for Poland long before I got the job offer and the least you could have done was write me a card or letter. You were gone almost three weeks before I started my trip." The beers came. The waitress lifted up the edge of her short dirty skirt and wiped off the glasses, exposing her panty less inner thighs. She winked at Peter and then walked away.

"I didn't think those types of girls wandered out of the red light district!" Peter laughed, watching her petite frame wiggle away into the café. "Nice legs though." He turned back to his beers.

"This is the red light district," I said, smiling and finishing off my first beer.

"Uh...I think wed better split, Ry'. I was gettin' interested in her but I don't have my shots and I just saw her scratching where the sun doesn't shine! It's a good thing we didn't drink out of the glasses, she might have just given us the gift that keeps on giving."

"Yea, old whores never die, they just smell that way, there must be nicer girls around than that," I said as I swung my jacket on and stepped over the fence with my long legs and on to the sidewalk. Peter jumped over and we walked to the Kabul to get a place for the night. The late summer evening was falling slowly on the city and the cool canal air filled the streets. One by one the street lights and the red lights came on as we walked back towards the centre of Amsterdam.

The Kabul, as I mentioned earlier, was a five-storey warehouse backed up against the canal that flows beside the train station. There are three floors for men and two floors for women. The sleeping arrangements left something to be desired. If you are lucky, you might find a single bed or a dirty cot. None of the beds are in rows. It's a jumbled mess of blankets and mattresses and bodies. It also depended on the season of the year. Amsterdam in early summer was in the full tourist season and generally teeming with the young vagabonds from around the world. The Kabul was packed the whole summer.

Peter and I were lucky in several respects that night. First, although the men's section was full to overflowing, there were some spaces in one of the women's sections, which was all right with us. Second, a young girl from Paris, whom we had met on the way to the Kabul, offered to let us share her double bed for the weekend.

The morning sun through an uncurtained window woke us from our 'menage a trois.' I sat up in the sweaty bed to look around at an almost empty room. We had stayed up most of the night touching and kissing and loving her and had slept through most of the morning. Many of the others had gone about their sightseeing and there were only five or six couples left asleep or waking as we were. Peter lay in Marie-Hellene's arms, his head cradled on her breasts. I shook him awake and we dressed. When we were ready to go, we covered her up with the sheet and left a note telling her when we would be back.

We weren't in the mood for a continental breakfast. It was almost noon anyway. From the Kabul we walked over the canal and past the fountain, which was still full of people but not as lively as the previous night. We made our way up the Klootzstrasse (one of the main streets) and into a restaurant, where we ordered a large steak for each of us, as well as some more beer. The restaurant was built on two different levels and held about fifty tables. It was in a deep blue velvet wallpaper.

"Were you in Poland all this time or what? You never did really say." I sipped on the beer before the food came.

"Yeah, and what a drag it was gettin' in. Those damn commies were everywhere. I went in through Germany and was questioned for two hours as to where the Hell I was going, who I was seeing...it was just a bunch of bureaucratic bullshit! I stayed with my aunt and uncle from my mother's side of the family, in a little town on the western border, called Lecinski."

"How is your mom, anyway?"

"She's taking Dad's death a little better now. My sister Jean is still at home to help out, though. I'll say you said hello in my next letter."

"Tell her Lisa and I will come and see her when I get back, ok?"

"Ok. She'll like that. Speaking of Lisa, are you going to tell her about sleeping with Marie-Hellene? You are getting married to her you know?"

"Umm.. You're not my mother ... Did you have much trouble getting out of Poland?" The waitress picked up the empty beers as she set our steaks down in front of us. It didn't take long for us to start into them.

"The same crap as before, except they put me through a strip search for drugs. One son of a Red stuck his finger up my ass hole looking for drugs so I blew a giant fart that cleared the whole room out. They couldn't wait for me to get across the border after that."

"You always were a crude person," I said, finishing my meal. "I wish I could have been there to see the look on their...."

"Ryan...Ryan Acker?" interrupted a familiar voice. "I Thought I recognized you! How have you been?" She got up from her table and joined us. Peter was bewildered. She looked vaguely familiar but I didn't know anyone in Holland who spoke English that well. "You remember the train ride across the northern part of France on your way to a job you were going to here in Holland, don't you? You saved our lives, remember?" Heads were beginning to turn our way and stare at this girl, whose whispers could be heard twenty feet away!

"He?" Peter pointed at me. "He saved your life? I don't believe it at all!"

"Joan!" I blurted, as the incident, which I'd temporarily forgotten, came back to me. She reached under the table and took my hand and squeezed it.

"He really did! If Ryan hadn't stepped in when those three Frenchmen started putting their hands all over us in the train, I don't know what my girlfriend and I would have done. We were really scared!"

"All I did was stand up and take my Bowie knife out of my pack and put it in my belt."

"Yeah, but they were half your size and you should have seen the looks on their faces when they saw all six foot six of you stand up!" She let go of my hand and laid it on my leg. She looked at Peter. "He even said we should all spend the night together to make us feel more secure. We found a room with a nice double bed in a little town called Boucher. Wasn't that gallant of Ryan?"

"Ryan did all that! My, my!" Peter said sarcastically, kicking me under the table and smiling at the

same time as he extended his hand to the tanned young woman sitting across from him. "I'm Peter Kurbogetic. Ry and I go to college together in Ontario."

"Joan Peacock," she responded. "My girlfriend and I are nursing students at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. Listen, I wish we could stay and chat, but we've got to catch the next train to Paris to get our plane connection home. It really was a coincidence, seeing you here just as we were leaving!" Her friend came over and Joan got up to leave and gave both of us a big kiss. Her girlfriend stood expressionless, just as she'd been the night we all slept together in that little room.

"Write to me when you get back to Canada." Joan's voice boomed as they walked up to the counter to pay their dinner bill. Peter and I sat there staring at them as they left. It had all happened so fast. We finished our meal and Peter looked up from his plate.

"Well, if you can't get a girl, get a nurse, eh?" Peter laughed. "I suppose you're not going to tell me you didn't make love to at least one of them, are you Ryan?" We left our money on the table and stood up to leave. "Speaking of nurses, I thought Lisa had you under her spell? Why all the secrecy from your best friend?"

"Take off, eh!" She's not moving in with me until September, so why can't...and what about last night? I didn't see you thinking about your girlfriend when the three of us were..."

"Ok, Ryan, you win and I hope you haven't been sleeping with my girl. Let's get out of here. I've got to cash some traveller's cheques and get some cancer sticks before I have a nicotine fit."

"Of course not." I said, clearing my throat and turning quickly away from the restaurant. We took a long afternoon ride on one of the canal tours and then a short bus ride to the north coast to swim in the ocean. When we arrived back in Amsterdam in the early evening, we walked from the bus depot over to the central fountain to listen to the people and the music. We saw Marie-Hellene again; she was sitting in a corner talking in French and holding hands with another man.

Peter suggested that we had better go back to my place since it didn't look like we had any place to sleep tonight. We picked up our stuff at the Kabul and headed back to the train station. Marie-Hellene blew us a kiss as we passed her and her new friend or old friend, we didn't know which, and I guess it didn't matter. He was facing away and did not see her goodbye kiss to us. I waved an unsympathetic goodbye. Peter told me later that he was jealous and had spread salt under the sheets of the double bed when we picked up our gear...cruel, but typical of Peter. The train almost left without us.

The flat green countryside passed before us as we sat across from each other in the seats nearest the window. Rows of windmills and canals stretched out under the setting sun. I had pulled out a deck of playing cards from my coat pocket and we were half way through a game of crazy-eights when the electric train began to slow down for a construction zone. I was facing the front of the train and could see that it was a bridge being repaired. It must have been important or they wouldn't have had people working on the weekend and especially at night. We were delayed for about twenty minutes while the train stopped about three hundred yards from the bridge.

Peter noticed it first: the sound of laughter on the mostly Dutch-filled train. I stood up and looked to the front of the slow-moving car. Row by row everyone had begun to look out my side and began giggling and laughing as the train moved ahead. A smile crossed my face as I sat down and looked up the tracks and at Peter's perplexed face.

"What's so funny, Ry?" Peter questioned.

"There's a 'no fishing' sign, in Dutch, on the other side of the bridge."

"So?"

"Well, it's been changed from 'Vissen Op de Brug is Verboden' by someone to 'Pissen Op de Brug...!'"

The train pulled into the station at Hillegom by nine and we were asleep by ten. There was a note from Leni beside the phone and a care package from my parents beside the bedroom door which would have to wait until morning to be opened. It would probably be clothing because that's all they seemed to think I ever needed.

## TIME WOUNDS ALL HEALS

"I have some things to tell you that might fill in the gaps in our lives, but first the good news! I've formed my own construction company here in Key West, and since it's at the end of Interstate #1 I've called it The End Of The Road Construction Company. I've just landed a three million-dollar renovation contract, gutting and rebuilding the old Casa Marina Hotel and I get to keep everything that's taken out. I'm gonna buy some more land and build a motel with all the leftovers and run it myself. By the way man, before I forget, I will be coming up to Toronto in a week or two for a contractor's conference at the Inn on the Park. I was wondering if I could stay with you and Lisa? I know mom and dad don't want me over at their place. I'd like to patch things up though, but I won't cut my hair, it's down to my ass now. I've almost knocked my drug habit, just a few joints now and then, man. Oh yea, and I've met a really nice girl from out of state and I plan on getting married soon."

Ryan put the letter down on his desk and ran his hands through his ear-length black hair. His coffee was cold so he went downstairs to the kitchen to plug in the kettle. It had been four and a half years since he had visited his brother, Philip. Ryan had resented the seventies drug culture that had swept his brother up in it. The only thing that seemed to have helped Philip out of all of this was his self-centered and egotistical personality which had left him in a state of semi-mellow. A dozen projects on the go, seldom brought to fruition. Ryan was not impressed with this new venture of his brothers but as long as Philip was happy that was all that mattered right now.

The kettle was ready and Ryan went back upstairs to finish the letter and work on his latest assignment for the Toronto Star where he'd been New Voices editor for the past two years. Philip seemed to be reaching out for that closeness they had in their youth, both for his brother and his sister, Taran. Their sister was still in high school and hadn't shown any noticeable interest in either of her two brothers. The only thing the Acker children had in common was their size. Ryan was six feet, six inches, Philip was six foot four and Taran was five feet, eleven inches tall. The 'giants of the north' as they were nicknamed by their friends and relatives in their parents home town of Ashland, Alabama. He took a sip of the coffee and sat down at his cluttered desk to finish the letter.

"Well Ry, since you are the writer and historian in the family, I thought you would like to know a few things that I recently found out from some of our relatives in Alabama and Georgia when I was there last year. One of the things I noticed as we grew up was our parent's paranoia with holidays. Mom was born on July the fourth, Dad was born on Valentines Day and you were born on V.J. Day and so on, right. Most of the other holidays seem to be death days, if you sit and think about it, man. Grandpa Acker passed away on Christmas Day a few years ago and both of our mother's parents, the Lovelace's, died together last New Years Eve, other relatives have died on Easter and Halloween, so you get my drift Ry."

"Now, I know you are sitting there saying to yourself that I was born on Mother's Day in '56. I hope you are sitting down and promise me you'll never bring this up at home 'cause mom has always hidden her feelings and she doesn't realize I found this out. Time wounds all heals, you know."

"I promise," Ryan found himself saying out loud. He took another sip from the cup. He leaned back in the chair, took a deep breath and continued reading.

"I was one of un identical twins. The other one died a few days later from blood clots in the brain. What a bummer! When I heard that I got right off drugs man. I realized how lucky I was to be alive and to do the things I wanted to do, but I stopped cold turkey, man!"

Ryan dropped the letter to his lap. His heart pounding was the only sound that could be heard in the house. His mind went blank for a long time. He now realized why his mother had cried on that day. It was not tears of joy for the gifts she received but the fine tears that accumulate in the eyes of God. The death of a child is always the greatest loss. He looked down at the letter.

"I was also talking to a ninety-four-year-old aunt of ours on the Lovelace side of the family and she told me that when her father was a little boy before the Civil War, he saw his father screw some of the slave girls on the plantation and saw them give birth to mulatto children! She has kept records of whom these

children married and their children who would be our parent's age now and she will send them to you if you write her. They are related, even if they are Negroes. Oh Ry, in order to show you how I felt when I was younger, I am enclosing a letter I wrote our parents when you were working in Holland. It was the day I ran away from home. I feel one hundred times better than I did then. I'm a new man and I'm in love. I want you to be the best man at my wedding, like I was at yours. There are other secrets to tell you but they can wait until I see you again. Take it easy, your brother, Philip."

Ryan put the letter down on the desk and reached inside the envelope, pulling out two pieces of yellowed paper. He had seen his brother change a lot during his school years in Toronto. He didn't like the way things were going with him but being away at college in St. Catharines, he couldn't do much about it. Ryan began to read the old letter. "As I sit here in the darkness of my room, contemplating the events that have shaped my life, I feel in a remote sort of way, a small, but unique, depression sweeping my whole being. Sadness fills my heart like a raging tide. I have had a much fuller life than an average young man in the sense of my experiences. I have felt what some men never feel. I feel that something very important should be happening in my life but I am just a block of stone. I now realize I no longer, want, out of life. I know not what I need. I am not truly happy as a teenager should be and I am plagued with feelings. I would rather be without these deep feelings. I feel I am actually being betrayed by a person cold and calculating with utterly selfish reactions and who is careless and apathetic in all things not directly related to me. I am a very selfish and self-centered person and although I have been known to do things for people I care for, I care for so few. I am not ashamed of my so called individuality. I also feel I enjoy it when some female person is hurt or jealous about or because of me, for I am constantly needing nourishment for my pride. When you find this letter, Mom and Dad, I will be gone. Your offspring, Philip Acker. "

Ryan put the letter down on the desk but he found his eyes glued to it, to part of his brother's life that he hadn't known existed. The strength of youthful conviction was so strong, so powerful that it leapt off those two pages like some literary giant he had never seen. If Philip has continued writing like this then Ryan would have new fodder for the literary trough of his New Voices column. Now was a good time for him and his brother to get to know each other again. He sat up straight in the chair like his mother had always told him to do and put the second letter back in the envelope and looked at the postmark. It had been mailed from Key West a week earlier, which could only mean that Philip should be here soon. Ryan, letter in hand, went downstairs to the kitchen and dumped the contents of the coffee cup into the stainless steel sink. Philip was on his mind when the phone rang. It was his father.

"Ryan, Oh dear God," he blurted, "Ryan, I hope you are sitting down because I have something terrible to tell you. I...I was going to come over in the car to tell you in person, but you will understand why I didn't when I finish." Ryan sat down in the leather chair and squeezed the arm rest tightly with his hand upon hearing his father's words. "...and that's the whole story as strange as it is to believe. Your brother, Philip, died instantly and painlessly when the oxygen cut off and they had no air left in the small plane." Ryan could hardly make out his father's words over the telephone. "The plane, was on automatic pilot and flew for a couple of hours until it ran out of gas and crashed into Lake Ontario about three hours ago and the police have just come by..." the phone was silent.

"Dad! Are you still there? I'll be right over..." Ryan, stunned by the sudden news, ran out the door, jumped into his jeep and drove towards his parent's house. He sped up as the streetlight turned from green to yellow but not fast enough to reach the other side of the intersection as the yellow turned to red and the traffic entered the lane he was in. Lisa Acker pulled her VW Rabbit into the driveway of their first home a half hour after her husband had left and found the house unlocked, the door open and the phone off the hook, dangling beside the chair and a piece of yellow writing paper.

(End)

## TSALAGI: TRAIL OF TEARS

A date in time with little or no significance in the overall scheme of things. Clear blue cold sky all around a breezeless day. FM 96 in the background. Sounds carried from a stereo donated to the cause of low income, enters my ears. The cat is listless and can't seem to sit still. He goes from cushion to table to the rug in ten second intervals intended to bewilder only the simple minded..

There are no ghosts here. Well only a few ghosts; present and past loves, children not yet children, parents. Some friends and in the mirror, FM 96 . . . *"Janie's gotta gun. Run away from the pain. Dog days just begun . . ."* Sun warms the sky and decreases the white on the window sill. Heats up the cat so that he has to move again. Transcend time and space. He thinks of food. I haven't moved from this metal chair and in front of the computer screen. Arms of flesh on arms of metal. The outline of my torso firmly meshed with the leather lined contour. My eyes follow the movement of paws and whiskers. Sunshine creeps across my middle-aged skin. A leafless dream catcher tree outside my window wipes away its frost. Shines glossy brown on a robin's egg sky. Remembers. FM 96: *"I close my eyes . . ."* Crossing my legs, I stretch my toes. The phone light flashes from its location on the black desk. Arm reaches out to the receiver and finds its way to my ear.

"The day has come for the restitution of our forgotten past. Time to close all the hurt and anger. Retell stories forgotten in the time of ash, turn the soil over with the plow and sow the seeds in the rows of our history. These are not peaceful times upon which one can calmly count on events to shape us with our fear. You have become more silent now, inside. Let the sun beat down on your face. Make it push back the corners of this very shadowed room. We have a history, you and me. It goes back into the past of our footsteps."

"Hello? Hello? Who is this?"

"I had a dream. In the dream I was in a room. The room was yellow brick. There was a table covered in maize and in the middle of the table was a naked child. I got down on my knees to pray and you were there. You gathered all the kernels in a basket. The child smiled at both of us. He held a broken arrow in his hand. The edge of the arrow cut me on the wrist and when you reached for me, it cut you on the wrist as well. Our blood ran together into a small bowl and the bleeding stopped. The dream stopped. The sound of one cat sleeping. Are you there?"

"I am . . . I'm here," I said between my lips and the telephone. The sun warmed down on me through the window and the phone was still there, wedged between my ear and my shoulder.

". . . and on this hot summer day I walk down the long dirt road between the farm and the center of town William has his hands in his pockets, shirt tail hanging out. There is a sense of purpose in my walk. I stare forward . . ."

"Today I am walking with my older brother on our way into town. We don't go in town that often because of the work we have to do on the farm and going ta school. Mostly cotton and a few chickens. He has his best coveralls on and his go-to-meetin' shoes. I just stride beside him with my hands in my pockets. I'm hot from the sun and a little bit thirsty."

". . . and I've been troubled by fears of somethin' I can't really explain. William doesn't seem to be troubled by anything. He's four years younger and hasn't experienced life that much. As we walk down the road, I kick a small stone near the curve where the road crosses the railway tracks where the steam train comes by on Tuesdays. I can't hear it splash 'cause I lost the hearing in my right ear due to catarrh . . ."

"There they go Pa. Off into town. I lean back in my wicker chair and pick a piece of snuff like my mother used ta do before breakfast when she'd take out her corncob pipe for a smoke. Blind she is now. William and his older brother Cecil are shuffling off down the old dusty road into town. And don't that boy ever tuck in his shirt in those baggy trousers and Lawd-a-Mighty, his feet must be hard as rock, he ain't worn shoes all his life. Pa. There's something I been meanin' ta tell ya."

"Been keepin' my eye on a large bird hangin' in the air overhead when my brother kicks a stone in the creek as we pass the old log bridge that Prosser Carr had built. A fly on my shoulder makes me turn my

head and look back. I see Ma and Pa sittin' on the front porch in the shade, in the corn husk chairs Ma made last winter when we lost the big field to the flood. I like to walk into town with my big brother. Usually on a hot day we go for a soda or a swim in the creek. He walks faster than me. I speed up."

"... and then I heard free land was being offered and given away up state in Clay County. I gotta get a place of my own, away from cotton. Corn and chickens are the future. Why can't my little brother keep up with me? It ain't his bare feet. They're as hard as rock. He most likely wants to stop for a swim. The sweat on my face is cooled by my straw hat. I reach over and grab a blade of grass and stick it in my mouth and chew on the end like I always do. Town Line is coming up. . . ."

"Town Line is comin' up and he's still chewing on that blade of grass like an old milch cow. That big bird is still flying up above and he ain't told me where we're goin'. He seems different today. Can't place it, but then he's almost 19."

"They must be at the Town Line by now, Ma. It's been nigh on half an hour by my watch. I slip it back in my trousers while I sit on the front porch. Still in love with my second wife beside me. Cotton's 'bout half picked and the Negroes that help out are over at a funeral in Millerville and Cecil wanted to go into town with his little brother. I reach over and pat the hound dog on the rump and scratch his old yeller head. What was that you wanted to tell me, Ma? I look over at her and she has her eyes closed to the sun. Just like when I came to help her daddy in 1881, topping the cotton and fell in love and married her in 1891. Then fell in love with her three-year-old son and then we had a son of our own. It's a big farm, one-hundred and twenty acres and I'm usually up early fixin' this or doin' that and all the while, Sarina's up there looking after the house, raisin' the boys and doin' her cookin'."

"... I pull my little brother up off the road and onto the sidewalk as we make our way the five miles into town. I been to school, not like Ma and Pa. While he's a good farmer, cotton is on the way out and chickens are on the way in. I read the paper when I came here last and saw an article by Guin Miller, about registering for land before August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1907. Next month that is . . ."

"Right up off the road and right onto the sidewalk. He practically picked me right up in the air. Then he put his arm around my shoulder and he smiled at me. He don't do that much. Usually he just pushes me around. Trees are shady and it's cool where we walk. We walk right past the house of my cousin Lecta. Right past the soda shop. We don't stop. We just walk right up to the center of town and right up the steps of the court house. High above the town, the long pitched scree of an eagle as it comes into view. I said it was just a bird but he said it was an eagle. Clear blue cloudless sky all around a breezeless day. Eagle dips in front of the sun, coming closer into town. Huge wings. The door is shut on my view."

"... and my heart beats faster as I drag William up the steps to the court house to find the Registry Office. He's just standing and looking out over the town. His body is relaxed and he lifts himself up on his heels, searching for something. I close the door behind us and we walk down a long dark hall. William is not interested in this place so I send him over to his cousin's house. They're the same age so they can go for a soda. I walk up to the Registry Office . . ."

"I gotta tell Pa. When he came by the farm to help daddy and we fell in love and married down the road at Listra Church and I had a son from my first husband, and I love him dearly. I gotta tell him that I love him still. I got to thinkin' that both he and Cecil . . . that Cecil should know that he was dropped off one morning for me to care for so I adopted him. He wasn't my dead husband's son. But Pa's asleep in his chair and the boys are still gone and it's still hot, and I'm tired."

"I was up in the hall at the top of the stairs with my sister, Leta, when I saw a big bird flying over the houses and the trees and the school. Off down the road I see my cousins coming into town again and Cecil and William walk right in front of my house. I am happy and I have a smile on my face when I have my cousin to play with. But when I get to the front porch, they just walk on by. They walk on by the soda shop. It is hot. The bird overhead is coming closer to the tree tops. I go out onto the sidewalk and follow them on down the street in my new shoes. I cross the town square. Cecil goes into the Courthouse and I am standing on the corner. I see people pass by. Grownups mostly, some minding their own business and some

not. All of a sudden, William comes out of the Courthouse and he sees me. I could go for a soda.”

“ . . . and on the wall of the Registry Office there is a note that is strange to me and yet familiar. There are some boys my age in the room and I think they look like me and they talk to me as if they know me. I don't know them but I see me in their eyes and their hair and skin. The note reads:

‘Land claims. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1905, the US Court of Claims ruled in favor of the Eastern and Cherokee and directed by the Secretary of the Interior, to identify persons entitled to a portion of the money appropriated by the US Congress on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1906, to be used for payment of these claims. Special Agent Guin Miller, Department of the Interior, began his work as appointed by the US Court of Claims as a Court Special Commissioner. The Court decrees that the money or land is to be distributed to all Eastern and Western Cherokee alive, after May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1906 who could establish that they are a member of the Eastern Cherokee Tribe or descendants of such members. They could not be members of any other Tribe. All claims must be found prior August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1907.’ “

“Pa has to know that the woman who dropped off my Cecil was an Indian from these parts. I feel anxious and my mouth is dry. Pa! Wake up! There's somethin' I gotta tell ya. Cherokee she was.”

“ . . . and do you affirm by your signature that you are a Cherokee? Mr. Miller said this to me and I want this so bad and in my heart and through my mouth I say . . . Yes. Outside I hear the eagle scream . . . scree . . . scree.”

“I'm here,” I said in the air between my lips and the telephone. The sun warmed down on me and the phone was still there, wedged between my ear and my shoulder. Scree . . . “No one on the other end.” The high pitched scream of the phone was quieted when I place it back on the receiver and get out of this chair. I flick off the computer and turn off the screen. The sky is still clear but the sun has just moved around to the other side of the apartment building. As I look out the window, a feather falls from some bird passing overhead calling in the cold afternoon sun.



## Book Reviews:

### ***Going Down Goose Lane Toward Broken Jaw: Fredericton poems and stories,***

by Wayne Ray (London Ont. Harmonia Press, 2005)

102 pp. \$15 ISBN 0-9688885-9-3

Review by Anne Burke for *Prairie Journal of Canadian Literature*

This collection is dedicated to Ray's workmates at 203 Waggoners Lane (Fredericton New Brunswick). Ray writes in the tradition of Jack Kerouac's "On The Road; fuelled by Joe Blade's "Vagabondia". (Blades was once a neighbor, hence the allusion to his "Broken Jaw" Imprint.) The allusion to "goose lane" places the locus for these poems [and stories] squarely in Fredericton, New Brunswick. (Think "Goose Lane Editions")

In "Back at The Post Office in London", Ray uses the binary of macrocosm and the microcosm to great effect. In the macrocosm, by trade he is sorting the mail, when he comes across correspondence marked "deceased". In the microcosm, in this particular instance, it signifies the death of his own father and evolves into his grief, how he was notified when his letter was returned.

There is a noble tradition of poet bards at the Post Office, gainfully employed as civil servants, while composing poetry. Witness Archibald Lampman and the Nineteenth Century Confederation Poets in Ottawa. Ray contributes his unique perspective. According to David Fraser, who offers a preface self-styled as a "review", Ray captures the poet "as voyeurs, the lonely hunting of the heart." Ray decided to include poems written to him "by friends and lovers I met along the way." We learn this from the author's comments on the poems, arranged chronologically, which he wrote when he was transferred from London Ontario to Fredericton. Fortunately, he fashioned "work" poems not only about the occupation but about graffiti ("Banting Building U of T"), protest ("George! Poets For Peace," and the Community Health Clinic "Room Mates: Samantha and Jen S."). The metaphor for "Chess Board of Life" (Wayne is moving in 5 Days") also appears in "Queen's Pawn 2". Then "Romeo & Juliet: Prick of the Dagger" is an ode to "Sam's Knife Collection." He seems preoccupied with time (dates of composition are marked by day, month and year) and place, with friends, (Breakfast at Cora's"), at the tavern ("Whippitt Lounge"), and in the poem "In a Dream".

The poem "You Cannot Give a Heart That Has Been Taken" is a collaborative poem composed online. He describes the characters by whether or not they have access to the World Wide Web. This certainly is an interesting analogy, given that he works at a Canada Post plant; he still found time to use the Internet, a competitor, if not enemy, to the mail carrier.

Despite the author's comments on his series of "Linked Short Stories", these are sketches or anecdotes (the unelaborated narration of a single event). He recognizes the artifice of events happening at the same time (since all occur on the same day over a period of a few hours). The sketches are arranged in roughly chronological order, using first-person narration in the first sketch and third-person in the others.

The sequence "Leaving London is used twice, for the linked series and for the second short story. In "May 2nd 2002" the protagonist, a male, forty years of age, introduces the reader to the picaresque of "low" characters. The picaresque means: of or relating to rogues or rascals and being a type of fiction dealing with the episodic adventures of a roguish protagonist. The settings are: Social Services, renovated low-income housing, sexual assault, and mental illness. What or who is it that links the slice-of-life "real stories", but the narrator. "I am an avid reader of world history, biographies, and other real things in this world" (p.61)

In the second (story), "Leaving London" Ryan has a cat Leviathan; he picks up a hitchhiker Mike, who cannot recall the name of the town he just left [or lived in]. Being a Good Samaritan Ryan drops him off at the Salvation Army Shelter [of the next town].

In the third, "Surprised by Joy", Brinda, on her way to Ireland, must pass airport security at Toronto International Airport. Once on board a Boeing, she reads a love letter. Instead of having a reunion with a

former boyfriend, she arrives in Dublin to learn that Tim, a current flame, has played a practical joke on her [and is waiting for her].

In the fourth, "Plaster Rock", Peter is driving a Ford pick-up, which breaks down. He takes the opportunity to "sucker punch" an elderly man, who later appears as a ghost. Ryan encounters the same truck but refuses to pick up Peter, hitchhiking.

In the fifth, "Karen Part 1: Kelly", Karen is shopping for a party, when she learns that Kelly has found her [birth] mother by using the Internet. Duncan shares a cab for his shift at the post office. In "Part 2: Sarah", Sarah is one of the party guests. In "Part 3: Allan, Kevin and Allen work at a farm. There is a cat named Kafka.

In the sixth, "The Newfie", John immigrates from Newfoundland to Fredericton. The joke is on him and the readers:

*"Then it happened. That one insight that changes a man's life, opens the synapses in the brain allowing the fingers of reality to seep into the empty spaces like a good shelf reading at the local library . . ."*

I will not reveal the mock heroic ending, you will have to buy the book.

His haiku were translated into Japanese and published by Mercutio Press in 2003, under the title *"In A Dream"*. Ray is strong on portraying aspects of character, with stream of consciousness and plotlessness by design. However, the "poetry of the People" (of which Milton Acorn was fond and for whom, Ray published his last book *"The Whiskey Jack"* the year he died), offers a kinder venue for his talents than the challenge of fiction. Perhaps the term "prose" poems might be more accurate, unless the material can prove to be the makings of a more ambitious project, such as the novel.

Wayne Ray founded HMS Press (1983) and co-founded the Canadian Poetry Association (1985), for which he has edited and produced several poetry anthologies. Some of them are: *POEMATA*, *Tear The Rust Off My Heart*, *EOA: Prose*, *Golestaneh (Iran)*, *Van Gogh's Ear: The Medusa Issue* (Paris France). This is his second short story collection. He has also written essays.

## ***Going Down Goose Lane Toward Broken Jaw***

by Wayne Ray (London Ont. Harmonia Press, 2005)

102 pp. \$15 ISBN 0-9688885-9-3

Review by David Fraser *Ascent Aspirations Magazine*

British Columbia

In the moving from one place to another, even if the transfer is only temporary, there is a fusion of the new and the old, the present and the past, and there is a distancing and a drawing closer. Wayne Ray, in his poetry and prose on a journey to Fredericton, New Brunswick in 2002 has created in his portrayed encounters on the road and in this new city a melancholy, yet hopeful feeling of distancing and connecting, and a sense of individuals searching and being in two places at once. The effects are subtle and lyrical giving the collection a variety of perspectives that are entertaining and thoughtful.

In the opening dedication, his haiku "in a dream/they become one/moth and flame" sets the stage for a Zen-like fusion. The following haiku allude to glimpses of place and relationships and we are drawn into poems that are full of reminiscences on love and relationships that were or could have been. There is an atmosphere of a dream in the re-creations, and the fragile vulnerability within the relationships.

In "Cora's: At the Window, Behind the Pane", the narrator is [at a table watching] catching a glimpse of a waitress dreaming, "lost in laughter" and wonders "where are you my friend". In "Going Home" we get a sense of place, of the fall – the "Old Loyalist Cemetery" with its inhabitants covered with the season's leaves, - a sense of things needing to be done, an impatience to be leaving but also a feeling of a beginning. In fact, throughout the collection there are comings and goings, leavings as odyssey that are both physical and psychological.

The poet as voyeur is at work here from his first watching the waitress at the glass of a Queen Street café, to observing a friend or a lover in "Cynthia Bachelor" at the mall, not approaching to say hello or goodbye but rather holding the image and her graceful face frozen in his memory. There is a melancholy longing in these distanced observations, in this "waking, wondering, wandering mind" that speculates "if...all you see is someone in the distance and your eyes say you wish it were me" in "What if...You Walk by Me". In "Talking to Friends", the narrator says to the person fixated on the Internet connections of chat room cyber-friendships "Too many months you've felt alone" and he stands behind her like a shadow wishing she'd turn off the monitor so she could see his reflection reaching out for her.

One thinks of the lonely hunting of the heart where characters touch and almost touch, connect and almost connect. Three friends at a cozy Valentine's Day dinner – an odd number – sipping wine, dissolving the icing flowers of the cake in their mouths but it all ends with "we dissolve the petals on our tongues", very sensual, "and go home alone". In "Whippitt Lounge", a rollicking romp of "beer sloshing", "gyrating and groping" as in former college tavern days, the narrator is high on the moment and the memory, but wakes up in his own bed alone, "pockets empty" and we sense there is more of the emptiness lurking in the shadows. In the collaborative poem "You Cannot Give a Heart That Has Been Taken", a great title, this theme of love and longing, memory and melancholy flows out in wonderful lines such as "gathering shadows about you to keep you warm at night", "the drums of singers...wails the longing", "thorns long ago tearing at the flesh", "burning memory on my life/leave a sunburn on my heart."

There is always the vulnerability in relationships, a sense of sacrifice as in "Romeo and Juliet: prick of the dagger". It is the pain of love that is spoken.

"for daggers deep they have known

and sleep in quiet peace, together sewn."

In "Not Looking to be Protected from Liking You" there is an irony in the title when we hear "I found you tearing down the heart wall to my house."

In "Sego Road" the metaphor of the highway, the journey becomes linked to friendship and the journey of a relationship. Here "the signs are blurred on the other side" but on his side "your name and the/remaining mileage to your door" is clear. Other poems are more objective and allude to the war in Iraq,

Princess Diana's response if she were still with us, a rant to George Bush and a letter home from a body bag.

The poems in this collection are narrative reminiscences, lyrical meditations that illustrate an actual journey over a space of time but also an internal journey, a reflection that takes us "time after page" through pleasant and painful memories and re-creations.

The second half of the collection is in the form of connected pieces of slice of life, short fiction that compliment the poetry. Here again characters are always on the move, or wanting to go. Ryan, a recurring character, is in the process of leaving London in the first piece. He struggles to set things in order while lumbered by a metaphorical "hitchhiker", Jessica. In the second piece, actually titled "Leaving London", he is physically on the road engaged in "a random act of kindness" picking up a one-legged hitchhiker. In the third story, Brinda is high in the sky flying to Dublin to meet a friend/possible lover who she hasn't seen in thirty years. She looks down from the plane and sees the solitary car that could be Ryan's on the Trans Canada Highway and wonders about the lonely traveler and speculates if he ever looks up to see her plane in the sky. From the previous story we know that he does look up and sees the vapor trail "cutting across the sky heading east". In "Plaster Rock", a character, Peter, drives a truck across a road leading to the Trans Canada Highway on an intersecting course to Ryan. He has stolen something that is hidden under the flapping tails of a tarp covering the truck bed, and he is haunted by an apparition of an old man. In the last story Karen plans a costume party, picks up a close friend, Sarah who is internally bruised and scarred by her insignificant other, and in another. The stories do not end, just as life and relationships do not end, but continue and evolve.

There are mysteries. Leviathan, Ryan's cat from London, doesn't seem to be with him and appears to have gone missing. An empty cage is in the back seat of his Corsica as he heads east. Karen's cat, Kafka, is left "wedged in the hole (in the window screen) that he had created". Sarah's gray cat is remarkably similar to Buster, Allen's cat. We get a hovering sense in these stories that characters desperately need to connect and the cats seem to exist on the periphery as surrogates for affection.

We meet Ryan through a stream of consciousness describing in two paragraphs all the repairs and renovations that he had been putting off that he has now been doing, now that he is renting the house and preparing to leave for Fredericton. In his kindness, he rescues a friend who owns an art gallery store, by agreeing to get a homeless, disturbed young woman, Jessica, out of the store. This one act of kindness is followed by many more as he helps Jessica, a dependent, yet independent, trusting, yet not trusting woman who is her own worst enemy. Ryan is a Good Samaritan who gives her shelter, lots of comfort, friendship and a place to stay. He even loans her his old Hudson Bay car blanket, which he "knew would never be returned". The blanket is symbolic of the friendship, the empathy; the caring that would never be reciprocated. He says "no gratitude, just want, want, want." The tale is a bizarre account of two characters connecting but not connecting really. Jessica rearranges all the books on the shelves of his library, a helpful gesture, but the arrangement is by book color, a spectrum "with the reds and greens on one side and the yellows, blues and whites on the other row of glass shelves".

Jessica showers incessantly and at length. These symbolic acts of cleansing finally get to Ryan and he cuts off the water, which brings about a bizarre and potentially deadly reaction. If Ryan didn't need to escape or run away from anything, he does now as is suggested by the hitchhiker in the next story.

In "Leaving London", Ryan says that the hitchhiker is "unlike anyone I had ever given a ride to". Here is a man who has just come with nothing, didn't tell anyone where he was going, can't recall the name of the town he now lives in or the name of the place where he works, and has recently lost his wallet and ID in the car of some so-called friends while on a drinking spree in Cornwall. Images from the works of Kafka jump to mind. Ryan says "I knew where I was going and where I was coming from," but a friend has told him, "I hope you find what you are looking for". The characters seem to be in contrast. Ryan, as he drops off the hitchhiker, advises him "to stop running away from the life you had and to go home". However, we get a sense that there are similarities. The hitchhiker can't see the similarity between Edmonton where he came from and Edmunston where he is now, but Ryan sees the connection coming from London Ontario where there is a Woodstock close by and the Woodstock New Brunswick that he is driving toward. Maybe there is a

bit of T.S. Eliot here?

“What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning  
The end is where we start from...”

Brinda on her trip to Dublin in answer to an old male friend's invitation asks, “What was a week out of one's life anyway?” Maybe that week makes all the difference. Maybe a year in Fredericton also makes all the difference. Certainly the collection of poems and pieces of short fiction arising out of that year away reflect a sense of the encounters, the “moth and the flame” in the dedication haiku, the connections, the reminiscences, the work of memory and reflection, the journey which is not so much a running way, but rather a running toward. This is a thoughtful slice of life collection that challenges the reader to delve deeper into the psyches of its characters.

## Bookmarks

Giants of the North

by Wayne Ray Third Eye Press (London, Ontario)

Review by Mark Young *Scene Magazine* 1992

The last Wayne Ray books reviewed in Bookmarks were critical works on modern haiku and found poetry. They were interesting but mostly analytical. The latest book by Ray (who is known more for his poetry) is a selection of short stories and the title entry, a novella. This is a collection much closer to his heart. It has this warmer feeling to it because it is semi-autobiographical. Why 'Semi?' Because by Ray's own admission, the names have been changed to protect the innocent.

*Giants of the North* is the story of Ryan and Philip Acker. American children whose father is stationed at an army base in Stephenville, Newfoundland. By this relocation, the children become Canadians, and by their height, they become 'Giants' to their southern relatives in Alabama. The story tracks their growing up, their fascination with their father's wartime experiences, their vacations in Lineville, Alabama, their separation after adolescence in the '60s, and what happens to each after that.

Ray has tremendous knowledge of and love for his characters, obviously because they are based on real people, but that is just as viable as a total fabrication, and it makes for a very engaging narrative. Anyway, I think that authors only rely on characters drawn from their own personal experience more often than they would like to admit. Add to his depth of characterization a tremendous feel for place and idiom. And the very real people come alive in a very real context. The sections on Alabama and Holland made me want to go to both places to see for myself, and I think there is a definite future in travel writing for the author. Strangely enough, I had just visited Newfoundland a few years ago, and so the description of Deer Lake and Corner Brook was like a piece of nostalgia for me.

The short stories in the *Slice of Life* section in Part Two are not without sparks of interest, especially *Stream of Consciousness*, but they are not of the uniform quality of the novella in the first part. They are all based on dreams, which wore thin after two or three stories ended with the death of the character, as dreams tend to do. But something has to be said about the publication quality of this book, which is very poor. Third Eye is a smaller publishing house [Small Press Publisher] and I can appreciate the budgetary problems they, like all small presses, are facing. But I have never seen so many typos and line and punctuation errors in my life. It's like they printed the typesetter's first copy without bothering to proofread. It may seem like a small point, but I find it very distracting, because sometimes the errors change the entire meaning of the sentence and one is left guessing. This is no fault of the author, and I can sympathize, but I'd proofread it myself before letting it go out like that. As to the story itself, though, a good read will be had by all. And after all, isn't that what counts?

Wayne (Scott) Ray was born in Alabama and spent most of his first fifteen years with his family on Ernest Harmon Air Force Base in Stephenville, Newfoundland until moving to Woodstock, Ontario in 1965. He became a Canadian Citizen in 1978. He lived in Toronto with his wife and two daughters from 1973-1988 when they moved to London, Ontario in July of 1988. Wayne is the founder of HMS Press publishing,



the Multicultural Poetry Reading Series (University of Toronto), Scarborough Arts Council Poetry Contest, co-founder of the Canadian Poetry Association (CPA) (1985-88 Toronto & 1992-1995 London) and co-chairman of the League of Canadian Poets: Associates (Toronto) for 1985/86. He was co-director of the Beaches Poetry Workshop in 1983 and was the recipient of the Editors Prize for 'Best Poet Published in 1989' from Canadian Author and Bookman. Through his work with the CPA as National Coordinator, it was his suggestion that established the poetry section of The Literary Review of Canada in 1993. He was instrumental in helping establish the London Arts Council and was the President of the New London Arts Festival in 1999. He is listed in Who's Who in Ontario. Wayne has several books of poetry and non-fiction published as well as credits in; anthologies, periodicals, journals and newspapers across Canada between 1983 and 2014.